BASEBALL JOE IN THE CENTRAL LEAGUE

LESTER CHADWICK

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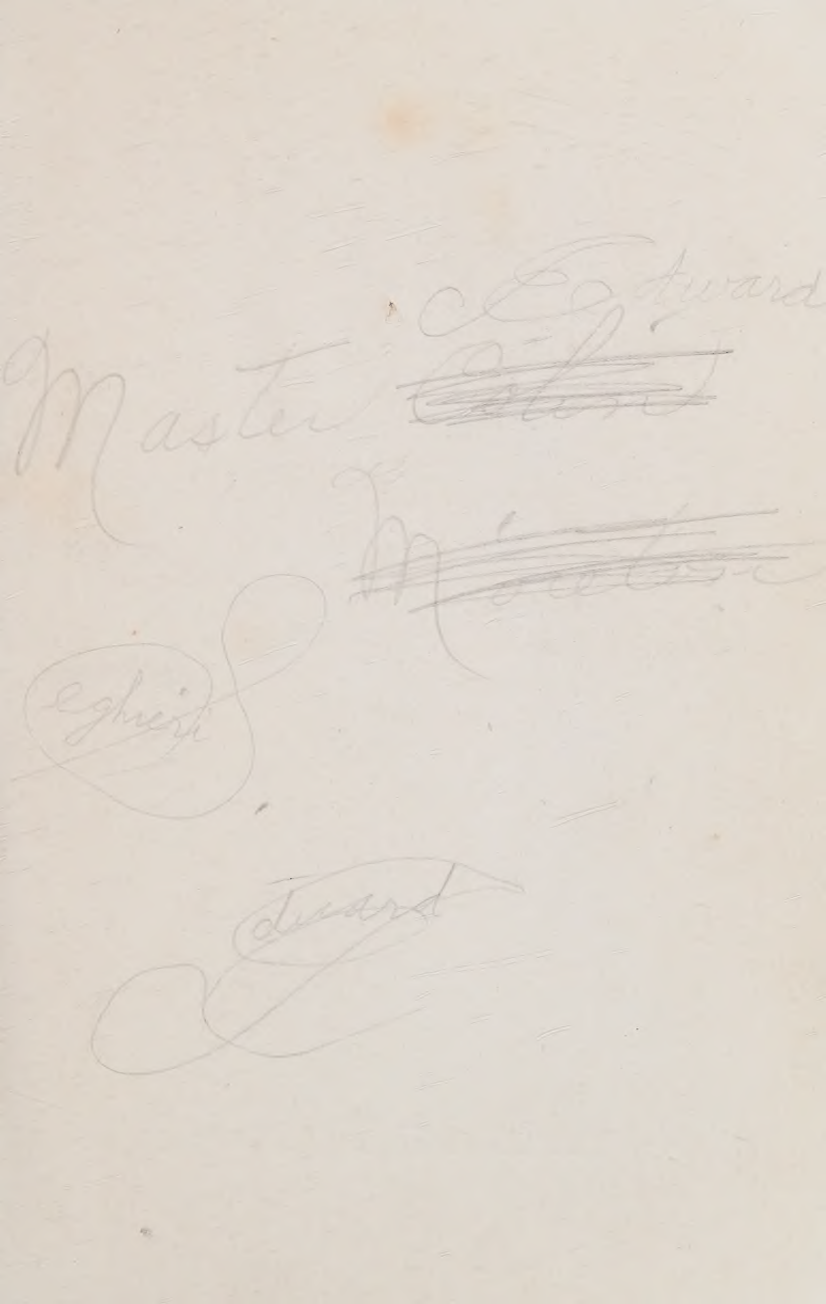

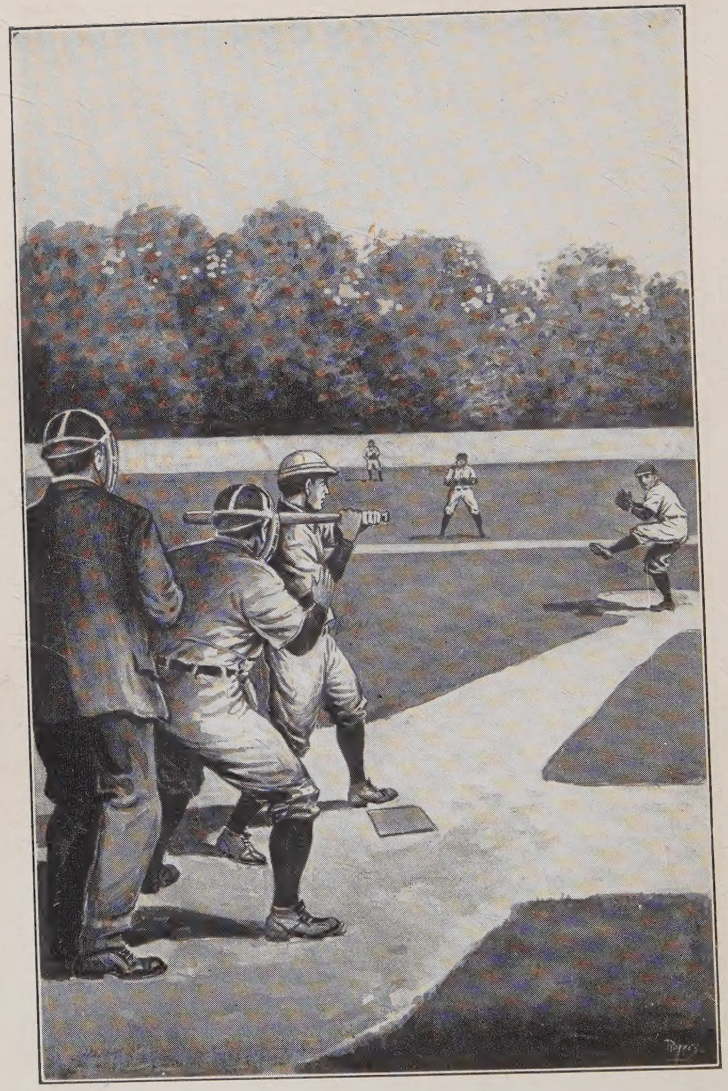

JOE STEADIED HIMSELF, AND SMILED AT HIS OPPONENT.

Baseball Joe in the Central League

OR

Making Good as a Professional Pitcher

By LESTER CHADWICK

AUTHOR OF

"BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS," "BASEBALL JOE AT YALE," "THE RIVAL PITCHERS," "THE EIGHT-OARED VICTORS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

BOOKS BY LESTER CHADWICK

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BASEBALL JOE IN THE CENTRAL LEAGUE

CHAPTER I

DANGER

"WHY, here's Joe!"

"So soon? I didn't expect him until night."

The girl who had uttered the first exclamation, and her mother whose surprise was manifested in the second, hurried to the door of the cottage, up the gravel walk to which a tall, athletic youth was then striding, swinging a heavy valise as though he enjoyed the weight of it.

"Hello, Mother!" he called gaily. "How are you, Sis?" and a moment later Joe Matson was alternating his marks of affection between his mother and sister.

"Well, it's good to be home again!" he went on, looking into the two faces which showed the pleasure felt in the presence of the lad. "Mighty good to be home again!"

"And we're glad to have him; aren't we, Mother?"

"Yes, Clara, of course," and Mrs. Matson spoke with a hesitation that her son could not help noticing. "Of course we just love to have you home Joe——"

"There, now, Mother, I know what you're going to say!" he interrupted with good-natured raillery. "You rather wish I'd stuck on there at Yale, turning into a fossil, or something like that, and——"

"Oh, Joe! Of course I didn't want you to turn into a fossil," objected his mother, in shocked tones. "But I did hope that you might——"

"Become a sky-pilot! Is that it, Momsey?" and he put his arm about her slender waist.

"Joe Matson! What a way to talk about a minister!" she cried. "The idea!"

"Well, Mother, I meant no disrespect. A sky-pilot is an ancient and honorable calling, but not for me. So here I am. Yale will have to worry along without yours truly, and I guess she'll make out fairly well. But how is everything? Seen any of the fellows lately? How's father? How's the business?"

The last two questions seemed to open a painful subject, for mother and daughter looked at one another as though each one was saying:

"You tell him!"

Joe Matson sensed that something disagreeable was in the air.

"What is it?" he demanded, turning from his mother to his sister. "What has happened?" It was not Joe's way to shrink from danger, or from a disagreeable duty. And part of his success as a baseball pitcher was due to this very fact.

Now he was aware that something had gone amiss since his last visit home, and he wanted to know what it was. He put his arms on his mother's shoulders — frail little shoulders they were, too—yet they had borne many heavy burdens of which Joe knew nothing. What mother's shoulders have not?

The lad looked into her eyes—eyes that held a hint of pain. His own were clear and bright—they snapped with life and youthful vigor.

"What is it, Momsey?" he asked softly. "Don't be afraid to tell me. Has anything happened to dad?"

"Oh, no, it isn't anything like that, Joe," said Clara quickly. "We didn't write to you about it for fear you'd worry and lose that last big game with Princeton. It's only that——"

"Your father has lost some money!" interrupted Mrs. Matson, wishing to have the disagreeable truth out at once.

"Oh, if that's all, we can soon fix that!" cried Joe, gaily, as though it was the easiest thing in the world. "Just wait until I begin drawing my

salary as pitcher for the Pittston team in the Central League, and then you'll be on Easy Street."

"Oh, but it's a great deal of money, Joe!" spoke Clara in rather awed tones.

"Well, you haven't heard what my salary is to be."

"You musn't make it so serious, Clara," interposed Mrs. Matson. "Your father hasn't exactly lost the money, Joe. But he has made a number of investments that seem likely to turn out badly, and there's a chance that he'll have to lose, just as some others will."

"Oh, well, if there's a chance, what's the use of worrying until you have to?" asked Joe, boy-like.

"The chances are pretty good—or, rather, pretty bad—that the money will go," said Mrs. Matson with a sigh. "Oh, dear! Isn't it too bad, after all his hard work!"

"There, there, Mother!" exclaimed the lad, soothingly. "Let's talk about something pleasant. I'll go down to the works soon, and see dad. Just now I'm as hungry as a—well, as a ball player after he's won out in the world's series. Got anything to eat in the house?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Clara, with a laugh, "though whether it will suit your high and mightiness, after what you have been used to at college, I can't say."

"Oh, I'm not fussy, Sis! Trot out a broiled

lobster or two, half a roast chicken, some oysters, a little salad and a cup of coffee and I'll try and make that do until the regular meal is ready!"

They laughed at his infectious good-humor, and a look of relief showed on Mrs. Matson's face. But it did not altogether remove the shadow of concern that had been there since Joe wrote of his decision to leave Yale to take up the life of a professional baseball player. It had been a sore blow to his mother, who had hopes of seeing him enter the ministry, or at least one of the professions. And with all his light-heartedness, Joe realized the shattered hopes. But, for the life of him, he could not keep on at college—a place entirely unsuited to him. But of that more later.

Seated at the dining-room table, the three were soon deep in a rather disjointed conversation. Joe's sister and mother waited on him as only a mother and sister can serve a returned son and brother.

Between bites, as it were, Joe asked all sorts of questions, chiefly about his father's business troubles. Neither Mrs. Matson nor her daughter could give a very clear account of what had happened, or was in danger of happening, and the young pitcher, whose recent victory in the college championship games had made him quite famous, remarked:

"I'll have to go down and see dad myself, and

give him the benefit of my advice. I suppose he's at the Harvester Works?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Matson. "He is there early and late. He is working on another patent, and he says if it's successful he won't mind about the bad investments. But he hasn't had much luck, so far."

"I'll have to take him out to a ball game, and get the cobwebs out of his head," said Joe, with a laugh. "It's a bad thing to get in a rut. Just a little more bread, Sis."

"And so you have really left Yale?" asked his mother, almost hoping something might have occurred to change her son's mind. "You are not going back, Joe?"

"No, I've quit, Mother, sold off what belongings I didn't want to keep, and here I am."

"And when are you going to begin pitching for that professional team?" asked Clara, coming in with the bread.

"I can't exactly say. I've got to go meet Mr. Gregory, the manager and the largest stockholder in the club. So far I've only dealt with Mr. James Mack, his assistant and scout. He picked me up and made a contract with me."

"Perhaps it won't go through," ventured Mrs. Matson, half-hopefully.

"Oh, I guess it will," answered Joe, easily. "Anyhow, I've got an advance payment, and I can

hold them to their terms. I expect I'll be sent South to the training camp, where the rest of the players are. The season opens soon, and then we'll be traveling all over the circuit—mostly in the Middle West."

"Then we won't see much of you, Joe," and his sister spoke regretfully.

"Well, I'll have to be pretty much on the jump, Sis. But I'll get home whenever I can. And if ever you get near where the Pittston club is playing—that's my team, you know—" and Joe pretended to swell up with pride—"why, just take a run in, and I'll get you box seats."

"I'm afraid I don't care much for baseball." sighed Mrs. Matson.

"I do!" cried Clara with enthusiasm. "Oh, we've had some dandy games here this Spring, Joe, though the best games are yet to come. The Silver Stars are doing fine!"

"Are they really?" Joe asked. "And since they lost my invaluable services as a twirler? How thoughtless of them, Sis!"

Clara laughed.

"Well, they miss you a lot," she pouted, "and often speak of you. Maybe, if you're going to be home a few days, you could pitch a game for them."

"I wouldn't dare do it, Clara."

"Why not, I'd like to know," and her eyes showed her surprise.

"Because I'm a professional now, and I can't play in amateur contests—that is, it wouldn't be regular."

"Oh, I guess no one here would mind, Joe. Will you have some of these canned peaches?"

"Just a nibble, Sis—just a nibble. I've made out pretty well. You can make as good bread as ever, Momsey!"

"I'm glad you like it, Joe. Your father thinks there's nothing like home-made bread."

"That's where dad shows his good judgment. Quite discriminating on dad's part, I'm sure. Yes, indeed!"

"Oh, Joe, you're so—so different!" said Clara, looking at her brother sharply.

"In what way, Sis?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, slowly, "I suppose it's—the college influence."

"Well, a fellow can't live at Yale, even for a short time, without absorbing something different from the usual life. It's an education in itself just to go there if you never opened a book. It's a different world."

"And I wish you had stayed there!" burst out Mrs. Matson, with sudden energy. "Oh, I don't like you to be a professional ball player! It's no profession at all!"

"Well, call it a business then, if you like," said Joe good-naturedly. "Say it isn't a profession, though it is called one. As a business proposition, Mother, it's one of the biggest in the world today. The players make more money than lots of professional men, and they don't have to work half so hard—not that I mind that."

"Joe Matson! Do you mean to tell me a ball player—even one who tosses the ball for the other man to hit at—does he make more than—than a *minister?*" demanded his mother.

"I should say so, Mother! Why, there are very few ministers who make as much as even an ordinary player in a minor league. And as for the major leaguers—why, they could equal half a dozen preachers. Mind, I'm not talking against the ministry, or any of the learned professions. I only wish I had the brains and ability to enter one.

"But I haven't, and there's no use pretending I have. And, though I do say it myself, there's no use spoiling a good pitcher to make a poor minister. I'm sorry, Mother, that I couldn't keep on at Yale—sorry on your account, not on mine. But I just couldn't."

"How—how much do you suppose you'll get a year for pitching in this Central League?" asked Mrs. Matson, hesitatingly.

"Well, they're going to start me on fifteen

hundred dollars a year," said Joe rather proudly, "and of course I can work up from that."

"Fifteen hundred dollars!" cried Mrs. Matson. "Why, that's more than a hundred dollars a month!"

"A good deal more, when you figure that I don't have to do anything in the Winter months, Mother."

"Fifteen hundred dollars!" murmured Clara. "Why, that's more than father earned when he got married, Mother. I've heard you say so—lots of times."

"Yes, Clara. But then fifteen hundred dollars went further in those days than it does now. But, Joe, I didn't think you'd get so much as that."

"There's my contract, Mother," and he pulled it from his pocket with a flourish.

"Well, of course, Joe—Oh! I *did* want you to be a minister, or a lawyer, or a doctor; but since you feel you can't—well, perhaps it's all for the best, Joe," and she sighed softly. "Maybe it's for the best."

"You'll see that it will be, Mother. And now I'm going down street and see some of the boys. I suppose Tom Davis is around somewhere. Then I'll stroll in on dad. I want to have a talk with him."

"Shall I unpack your valise?" asked Clara.

"Yes. I guess I'll be home for a few days be-

fore starting in at the training camp. I'll be back to supper, anyhow," and, with a laugh he went out and down the main street of Riverside, where the Matsons made their home.

As Baseball Joe walked along the thoroughfare he was greeted by many acquaintances—old and young. They were all glad to see him, for the fame of the pitcher who had won the victory for Yale was shared, in a measure, by his home town. In the case of baseball players, at least, they are not "prophets without honor save in their own country."

Joe inquired for his old chum, Tom Davis, but no one seemed to have noticed him that day, and, making up his mind he would locate him later, the young pitcher turned his footsteps in the direction of the Royal Harvester Works, where his father was employed. To reach the plant Joe had to cross the railroad, and in doing this he noticed a man staggering along the tracks.

The man was not a prepossessing specimen. His clothes were ragged and dirty—in short "tramp" was written all over him.

"And he acts as though he were drugged, or had taken too much whiskey," said Joe. "Too bad! Maybe he's had a lot of trouble. You can't always tell.

"But I'm sure of one thing, and that is he'd

better get off the track. He doesn't seem able to take care of himself.

"Look out there!" cried the young pitcher, with sudden energy. "Look out for that freight, old man! You're walking right into danger!"

A train of freight cars was backing down the rails, right upon the man who was staggering along, unheeding.

The engineer blew his whistle shrilly—insistently; but still the ragged man did not get off the track.

Joe sprinted at his best pace, and in an instant had grasped the man by the arm. The tramp looked up with bleary, blood-shot eyes—uncomprehending—almost unseeing.

"Wha—wha's matter?" he asked, thickly.

"Matter—matter enough when you get sense enough to realize it!" said Joe sharply, as he pulled him to one side, and only just in time, for a second later the freight train thundered past at hardly slackened speed in spite of the fact that the brakes had been clapped on.

The man staggered at Joe's sudden energy, and would have toppled over against a switch had not the young pitcher held him.

CHAPTER II

OFF FOR THE SOUTH

SWEEPING past, in the cab of the locomotive, the engineer leaned out and shook his fist at the tramp.

"You ought to be locked up!" he yelled, with savage energy. Then, lest he might not seem to appreciate Joe's action in saving the man's life and preventing a lot of trouble for the railroad authorities, the engineer added:

"Much obliged to you, young fellow. You saved us a bad mess. Better turn that hobo over to one of the yard detectives. He'll take care of him, all right."

"No, I'll get him off the tracks and start him home, if I can," answered Joe, but it is doubtful if the engineer heard.

"You had a close call, old man," went on Joe, as he helped the tramp to stand upright. "Better get off the railroad. Where do you want to go?"

"Hey?"

"I ask you where you want to go. I'll give

you a hand, if it isn't too far. It's dangerous here —for a man in your—condition."

"Uh! Don't make no difference where I go, I reckon," replied the man, thickly. "No difference at all. I'm down and out, an' one place's good's nuther. Down—an'—out!"

"Oh, well, maybe you can come back," said Joe, as cheerfully as he could. "Don't give up."

"Come back! Huh! Guess you don't know the game. Fellers like me never come back. Say, bo, you've got quite an arm on you," he said admiringly, as he noted the ease with which the young pitcher helped him over the tracks. The unfortunate man could hardly help himself. "You've got an arm—all right."

"Oh, nothing much. Just from pitching. I expect."

"Pitching!" The man straightened up as though a lash had struck him. "Pitching, did you say? In—er—in what league?"

"Not in any league yet, though I've signed with the Central."

"The Central? Huh! A bush league."

"I left the Yale 'varsity to go with them," said Joe, a little nettled at the tone of the man whose life he had just saved.

"Oh—you pitched for Yale?" There was more deference shown now.

"Yes, and we beat Princeton."

"You did? An' you pitched? Say, young feller, put her there! Put her—there!" The man held out an unsteady hand, which Joe, more to quiet him than for any other reason, clasped firmly.

"An' you beat Princeton! Good for you! Put her there! I—er—I read about that. I can read—I got a good education. But I—er—Oh, I'm a fool, that's what I am. A fool! An' to think that I once—Oh, what's the use—what's the use?"

The energy faded away from his voice, and he ended in a half sob. With bowed head he allowed Joe to lead him across the tracks. A number of railroad men who had seen the rescue looked at the pair, but once the tramp was off the line, and out of immediate danger, they lost interest.

"Can I help you—do you want to go anywhere in particular?" asked Joe, kindly.

"What's the use of goin' anywhere in particular?" was the demand. "I've got nowhere to go. One place is as good as another when you're down—and out. Out! Ha! Yes, out! He's out—out at first—last—out all the time! Out!"

"Oh, quit!" exclaimed Joe, sharply, for the man was fast losing his nerve, and was almost sobbing.

"That's right, young feller—that's right!" came the quick retort. "I do need pullin' up.

Much obliged to you. I—I guess I can take care of myself now."

"Have you any—do you need any—money?" hesitated Joe.

"No—no, thank you. I've got some. Not much, but enough until I can get—straightened out. I'm much obliged to you."

He walked straighter now, and more upright.

"Be careful to keep off the tracks," warned Joe.

"I—I will. Don't worry. Much obliged," and the man walked off into the woods that adjoined the railroad.

"Poor old chap," mused the young pitcher, as he resumed his way to his father's shop. And while I have just a few moments I will take advantage of them to make my new readers better acquainted with Joe, and his achievements, as detailed in the former books of this series.

The first volume is entitled "Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars," and tells how Joe began his career as a pitcher. The Silver Stars were made up of ball-loving lads in Riverside, a New England town where Joe lived with his parents and his sister Clara. Mr. Matson was an inventor of farming machinery, and had perfected a device that brought him in substantial returns.

Joe, Tom Davis, and a number of other lads formed a team that was to represent Riverside. Their bitterest rivals were the Resolutes of Rocky-

ford, a neighboring town, and many hot battles of the diamond were fought. Joe rapidly developed as a pitcher, and it was due to his efforts that his team made such an excellent showing.

In the second book, entitled, "Baseball Joe on the School Nine," I related what happened when our hero went to Excelsior Hall, a boarding institution just outside of Cedarhurst.

Joe did not find it so easy, there, to make a showing as a pitcher. There was more competition to begin with, and he had rivals and enemies. But he did not give up, and, in spite of many difficulties, he finally occupied the mound when the annual struggle for the Blue Banner took place. And what a game that was!

Joe spent several terms at Excelsior Hall, and then, more in deference to his mother's wishes than because he wanted to, he went to Yale.

For an account of what happened there I refer my readers to the third book of the series, called "Baseball Joe at Yale." Joe had an uphill climb at the big university. Mingled with the hard work, the hopes deferred and the jealousies, were, however, good times a-plenty. That is one reason why Joe did not want to leave it. But he had an ambition to become a professional ball player, and he felt that he was not fitted for a college life.

So when "Jimmie" Mack, assistant manager of the Pittston team of the Central League, who was

out "scouting" for new and promising players, saw Joe's pitching battle against Princeton, he made the young collegian an offer which Joe did not feel like refusing.

He closed his college career abruptly, and when this story opens we find him coming back from New Haven to Riverside. In a day or so he expected to join the recruits at the training camp of the Pittston nine, which was at Montville, North Carolina.

As Joe kept on, after his rescue of the tramp, his thoughts were busy over many subjects. Chief among them was wonder as to how he would succeed in his new career.

"And then I've got to learn how dad's affairs are," mused Joe. "I may have to pitch in and help him."

Mr. Matson came from his private office in the Harvester Works, and greeted Joe warmly.

"We didn't expect you home quite so soon," he said, as he clasped his son's hand.

"No, I found out, after I wrote, that I was coming home, that I could get an earlier train that would save me nearly a day, so I took it. But, Dad, what's this I hear about your financial troubles?"

"Oh, never mind about them, Joe," was the evasive answer.

"But I want to mind, Dad. I want to help you."

Mr. Matson went into details, with which I will not tire the reader. Sufficient to say that the inventor had invested some capital in certain stocks and bonds the value of which now seemed uncertain.

"And if I have to lose it—I have to, I suppose," concluded Joe's father, resignedly. "Now, my boy, tell me about yourself—and—baseball," and he smiled, for he knew Joe's hobby.

Father and son talked at some length, and then, as Mr. Matson had about finished work for the day, the two set out for home together. On the way Joe met his old chum, Tom Davis, and they went over again the many good times in which they had taken part.

Joe liked his home—he liked his home town, and his old chums, but still he wished to get into the new life that had called him.

He was not sorry, therefore, when, a few days later he received a telegram from Mr. Mack, telling him to report at once at Montville.

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed his mother. "Do you really have to go so soon?"

"I'm afraid so, Momsey," he answered. "You see the league season will soon open and I want to begin at the beginning. This is my life work, and I can't lose any time."

"Pitching ball a life work!" sighed Mrs. Mat-

son. "Oh, Joe! if it was only preaching—or something like that."

"Let the boy alone, Mother," said Mr. Matson, with a good-humored twinkle in his eye. "We can't all be ministers, and I'd rather have a world series winner in my family than a poor lawyer or doctor. He'll do more good in society, too. Good luck to you, Joe."

But Joe was not to get away to the South as quietly as he hoped. He was importuned by his old baseball chums to pitch an exhibition game for them, but he did not think it wise, under the circumstances, so declined.

But they wanted to do him honor, and, learning through Tom Davis—who, I may say in passing, got the secret from Clara—when Joe's train was to leave, many of the old members of the Silver Stars gathered to wish their hero Godspeed.

"What's the matter with Baseball Joe?" was the cry outside the station, whither Joe had gone with his sister and mother, his father having bidden him good-bye earlier.

"What's the matter with Joe Matson?"

"*He's—all—right!*" came the staccato reply.

Again the demand:

"Who's all right?"

"*Baseball Joe!*"

"Why—what—what does it mean?" asked

Mrs. Matson in bewilderment as she sat near her son in the station, and heard the cries.

"Oh, it's just the boys," said Joe, easily.

"They're giving Joe a send-off," explained Clara.

Quite a crowd gathered as the members of the amateur nine cheered Joe again and again. Many other boys joined in, and the scene about the railroad depot was one of excitement.

"What's going on?" asked a stranger.

"Joe Matson's going off," was the answer.

"Who's Joe Matson?"

"Don't you know?" The lad looked at the man in half-contempt. "Why, he pitched a winning game for Yale against Princeton, and now he's going to the Pittstons of the Central League."

"Oh, I see. Hum. Is that he?" and the man pointed to the figure of our hero, surrounded by his friends.

"That's him! Say, I wish he was me!" and the lad looked enviously at Joe.

"I—I never knew baseball was so—so popular," said Mrs. Matson to Clara, as the shouting and cheers grew, while Joe resisted an attempt on the part of the lads to carry him on their shoulders.

"I guess it's as much Joe as it is the game," answered Clara, proudly.

"Three cheers for Joe!" were called for, and given with a will.

Again came the question as to who was all right, and the usual answer followed. Joe was shaking hands with two lads at once, and trying to respond to a dozen requests for letters, or passes to the league games.

Then came the whistle of the train, more hurried good-byes, a last kiss for his mother and sister — final cheers — shouts — calls for good wishes—and Joe was on his way to the Southern baseball camp.

CHAPTER III

AN ACCUSATION

"WHEW!" exclaimed Joe, as he sank into a car seat and placed his valise beside him. "Some doings—those!"

Several passengers looked at him, smiling and appreciative. They had seen and heard the parting ovation tendered to our hero, and they understood what it meant.

Joe waved his hand out of the window as the train sped on, and then settled back to collect his thoughts which, truth to tell, were running riot.

Pulling from his pocket some books on baseball, one of which contained statistics regarding the Central League, Joe began poring over them. He wanted to learn all he could about the organization with which he had cast his fortunes.

And a few words of explanation concerning the Central League may not be unappreciated by my readers.

In the first place let me be perfectly frank, and state that the Central League was not one of the

big ones. I have not masqueraded a major league under that title. Some day I hope to tell you some stories concerning one of the larger leagues, but not in this volume.

And in the second place Joe realized that he was not going to astonish the world by his performances in this small league. He knew it was but a "bush league," in a sense, yet he had read enough of it to know that it was composed of clean-cut clubs and players, and that it bore a good reputation. Many a major league player had graduated from this same Central, and Joe—well, to put it modestly—had great hopes.

The Central League was of the Middle West. It played its eight clubs over a circuit composed of eight well-known cities, which for the puposes of this story I have seen fit to designate as follows: Clevefield, Pittston (to which club Joe had been signed), Delamont, Washburg, Buffington, Loston, Manhattan and Newkirk. Perhaps, as the story progresses, you may recognize, more or less successfully, certain players and certain localities. With that I have nothing to do.

The train sped on, stopping at various stations, but Joe took little interest in the passing scenery, or in what took place in his coach. He was busy over his baseball "dope," by which I mean the statistics regarding players, their averages, and so forth.

"And my name will soon be among 'em!" exulted Joe.

As the train was pulling out of a small station, Joe looked out of the window, and, to his surprise, saw, sitting on a baggage truck, the same tramp he had saved from the freight train some days before.

"Hum!" mused Joe. "If he's beating his way on the railroad he hasn't gotten very far," for this was not many miles from Riverside. "I guess he's a sure-enough hobo, all right. Too bad!"

Others beside Joe seemed to have noticed the tramp, who, however, had not looked at our hero. One of two men in the seat back of Joe spoke, and said:

"I say, Reynolds, see that tramp sitting there?"

"You mean the one on the truck?"

"Yes. Do you recognize him?"

"Recognize him? I should say not. I'm not in the habit of——"

"Easy, old man. Would you be surprised if I told you that many times you've taken your hat off to that same tramp, and cheered him until you were hoarse?"

"Get out!"

"It's a fact."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know who he is now—not much, to judge by his looks; but that's old Pop Dutton,

who, in his day, was one of the best pitchers Boston ever owned. He was a wonder!"

"Is that Pop Dutton?"

"That's the wreck of him!"

"How have the mighty fallen," was the whispered comment. "Poor old Pop! Indeed, many a time I have taken my hat off to him! He sure was a wonder. What caused his downfall?"

"Bad companions—that and—drink."

"Too bad!"

Joe felt an irresistible impulse to turn around and speak to the two men. But he refrained, perhaps wisely.

"And to think that I saved his life!" mused Joe. "No wonder he talked as he did. Pop Dutton! Why, I've often read of him. He pitched many a no-hit no-run game. And now look at him!"

As the train pulled out Joe saw the wreck of what had once been a fine man stagger across the platform. A railroad man had driven him from the truck. Joe's heart was sore.

He realized that in baseball there were many temptations, and he knew that many a fine young fellow had succumbed to them. But he felt himself strong enough to resist.

If Joe expected to make the trip South with speed and comfort he was soon to realize that it was not to be. Late that afternoon the train came

to an unexpected stop, and on the passengers inquiring what was the trouble, the conductor informed them that, because of a wreck ahead, they would be delayed at a little country station for several hours.

There were expostulations, sharp remarks and various sorts of suggestions offered by the passengers, all of whom seemed to be in a hurry. Joe, himself, regretted the delay, but he did not see how it could be avoided.

"The company ought to be sued!" declared a young man whose rather "loud" clothes proclaimed him for an up-to-date follower of "fashion." He had with him a valise of peculiar make —rather conspicuous—and it looked to be of foreign manufacture. In fact, everything about him was rather striking.

"I ought to be in New York now," this young chap went on, as though everyone in the train was interested in his fortunes and misfortunes. "This delay is uncalled for! I shall start suit against this railroad. It's always having wrecks. Can't we go on, my good man?" he asked the conductor, sharply.

"Not unless you go on ahead and shove the wreck out of the way," was the sharp answer.

"I shall report you!" said the youth, loftily.

"Do! It won't be the first time I've been reported—my good fellow!"

The youth flushed and, taking his valise, left the car to enter the small railway station. Several other passengers, including Joe, did the same, for the car was hot and stuffy.

Joe took a seat near one where the modish young man set down his queer valise. Some of the other passengers, after leaving their baggage inside, went out on the platform to stroll about. Joe noted that the young man had gone to the telegraph office to send a message.

Our hero having nothing else to do, proceeded to look over more of his baseball information. He was deep in a study of batting averages when he was aware that someone stood in front of him.

It was the young man, who had his valise open, and on his face was a puzzled expression, mingled with one of anger.

"I say now! I say!" exclaimed the young chap. "This won't do! It won't do at all, you know!" and he looked sharply at Joe.

"Are you speaking to me?" asked the young pitcher. "If you are I don't know what it is that won't do—and I don't care."

"It won't do at all, you know!" went on the young man, speaking with what he probably intended to be an English accent. "It won't do!"

"What won't?" asked Joe sharply.

"Why, taking things out of my valise, you

know. There's a gold watch and some jewelry missing—my sister's jewelry. It won't do!"

"Do you mean to say that I had anything to do with taking jewelry out of your valise?" asked Joe hotly.

"Why—er—you were sitting next to it. I went to send a wire—when I come back my stuff is missing, and——"

"Look here!" cried the young pitcher in anger. "Do you mean to accuse me?" and he jumped to his feet and faced the young man. "Do you?"

"Why—er—yes, I think I do," was the answer. "You were next my bag, you know, and—well, my stuff is gone. It won't do. It won't do at all, you know!"

CHAPTER IV

IN TRAINING

For a moment Joe stood glaring at the modish young man who had accused him. The latter returned the look steadily. There were superciliousness, contempt and an abiding sense of his own superiority in the look, and Joe resented these too-well displayed feelings fully as much as he did the accusation.

Then a calmer mood came over the young pitcher; he recalled the training at Yale—the training that had come when he had been in troublesome situations—and Joe laughed. It was that laugh which formed a safety-valve for him.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at," sneered the young man. "My valise has been opened, and my watch and some jewelry taken."

"Well, what have I got to do with it?" demanded Joe hotly. "I'm not a detective or a police officer!"

Joe glanced from the youth to the bag in question. It was a peculiar satchel, made of some odd leather, and evidently constructed for heavy use.

It was such a bag as Joe had never seen before. It was open now, and there could be noticed in it a confused mass of clothes, collars, shirts of gaudy pattern and scarfs of even gaudier hues.

The young pitcher also noticed that the bag bore on one end the initials "R. V." while below them was the name of the city where young "R. V." lived—Goldsboro, N. C.

"Suffering cats!" thought Joe, as he noted that. "He lives in Goldsboro. Montville is just outside that. I hope I don't meet this nuisance when I'm at the training camp."

"I did not assume that you were an officer," answered the young man, who, for the present, must be known only as "R. V." "But you were the only one near my valise, which was opened when I went to send that wire. Now it's up to you——"

"Hold on!" cried Joe, trying not to let his rather quick temper get the better of him. "Nothing is 'up to me,' as you call it. I didn't touch your valise. I didn't even know I sat near it until you called my attention to it. And if it was opened, and something taken out, I beg to assure you that I had nothing to do with it. That's all!"

"But if you didn't take it; who did?" asked "R. V." in some bewilderment.

"How should I know?" retorted Joe, coolly.

"And I'd advise you to be more careful after this, in making accusations."

He spoke rather loudly—in fact so did "R. V.," and it was but natural that several of the delayed passengers should gather outside the station, attracted by the voices.

Some of them looked in through the opened windows and doors, and, seeing nothing more than what seemed to be an ordinary dispute, strolled on.

"But this won't do," insisted "R. V.," which expression seemed to be a favorite with him. "This won't do at all, you know, my good fellow. My watch is gone, and my sister's jewelry. It won't do——"

"Well, I have nothing to do with it," declared Joe, "and I don't want to hear any more about it. This ends it—see!"

"Oh, but I say! You were nearest to my valise, and——"

"What's the trouble?" interrupted the ticket agent, coming from his little office. "What's the row here?"

"My valise!" exclaimed "R. V." angrily. "It's been opened, and——"

"He thinks I did it just because I sat near it!" broke in Joe, determined to get in his word first. "It's absurd! I never touched his baggage."

The agent looked at the modish youth.

"Is that the only reason you accuse him—because he sat near your satchel?" he asked.

"Why—er—yes, to be sure. Isn't that reason enough?"

"It wouldn't be for me, young man. I don't see that you can do anything about it. You say he took something of yours, and he says he didn't. That's six of one and a half-dozen of the other. You ought to have your satchel locked if you carry valuables in it."

"It was locked, but I opened it and forgot to lock it again."

"That's up to you then," and the agent's sympathies seemed to be with Joe.

"Well, but it won't do, you know. It won't do at all!" protested "R. V.," this time pleadingly. "I must have my things back!"

"Then you had better go to the police," broke in the agent.

"If you like, though I've never done such a thing before, I'll submit to a search," said Joe, the red blood mantling to his cheeks as he thought of the needless indignity. "I can refer to several well-known persons who will vouch for me, but if you feel——"

"All aboard!" suddenly called the conductor of the stalled train, coming into the depot. "We just got word that we can proceed. If we can reach the next junction before the fast mail, we

can go ahead of her and get around the wreck. Lively now! All aboard!"

There was a scramble in which Joe and "R. V." took a part. All of the passengers were anxious to proceed, and if haste meant that they could avoid further delay they were willing to hasten. The engineer whistled impatiently, and men and women scrambled into the coaches they had left.

"R. V." caught up his peculiar bag and without another look at Joe, got aboard. For a moment the young pitcher had an idea of insisting on having the unpleasant matter settled, but he, too, wanted to go on. At any rate no one he knew or cared about had heard the unjust accusation made, and if he insisted on vindication, by means of a personal search, it might lead to unpleasant complications.

"Even if he saw that I didn't have his truck on me that wouldn't prove anything to him—he'd say it 'wouldn't do,'" thought Joe. "He's altogether too positive."

And so, leaving the matter of the missing articles unsettled, Joe sprinted for the train.

Joe saw his accuser enter the rear coach, while the young ball player took his place in the second coach, where he had been before.

"If he wants to take up this matter again he knows I'm aboard," mused Joe, as the train pulled out of the way-station.

But the matter was not reopened, and when the junction was reached our hero saw "R. V." hurrying off to make other connections. As he turned away, however, he favored Joe with a look that was not altogether pleasant.

The remainder of our hero's trip to Montville was uneventful, save that it was rather monotonous, and, the further South he went the worse the railroad service became, until he found that he was going to be nearly half a day late.

But he was not expected at any special time, and he knew that he had done the best possible. Arriving in Montville, which he found to be a typical small Southern town, Joe put up at the hotel where he had been told by "Jimmie" Mack to take quarters.

"Are any of the Pittston players around—is Mr. Gregory here?" asked Joe of the clerk, after registering. It was shortly after two o'clock.

"They're all out practicing, I believe," was the answer. "Mr. Gregory was here a while ago, but I reckon as how he-all went out to the field, too. Are you a member of the nine, sir?"

The clerk really said "suh," but the peculiarities of Southern talk are too well known to need imitating.

"Well, I suppose I am, but I've only just joined," answered Joe, with a smile. "I'm one of the new pitchers."

"Glad to know you. We enjoy having you ball players here. It sort of livens things up. I believe your team is going to cross bats with our home team Saturday."

"That's good!" exclaimed Joe, who was just "aching" to get into a game again.

He ate a light luncheon and then, inquiring his way, went out to the ball field.

He was rather disappointed at first. It was not as good as the one where the Silver Stars played—not as well laid out or kept up, and the grandstand was only about half as large.

"But of course it's only a practice field," reasoned Joe, as he looked about for a sight of "Jimmie" Mack, whom alone he knew. "The home field at Pittston will probably be all right. Still, I've got to remember that I'm not playing in a major league. This will do for a start."

He looked over the men with whom he was to associate and play ball for the next year or so—perhaps longer. The members of the team were throwing and catching—some were batting flies, and laying down grounders for others to catch or pick up. One or two were practicing "fungo" batting. Up near the grandstand a couple of pitchers were "warming-up," while the catchers were receiving the balls in their big mitts.

Several small and worshipping boys were on hand, as always is the case, gathering up the dis-

carded bats, running after passed balls and bringing water to their heroes.

"Well, I'm here, anyhow," thought Joe. "Now to see what sort of a stab I can make at professional ball."

No one seemed to notice the advent of the young pitcher on the field, and if he expected to receive an ovation, such as was accorded to him when he left home, Joe was grievously disappointed.

But I do not believe Joe Matson looked for anything of the sort. In fact I know he did not, for Joe was a sensible lad. He realized that however good a college player he might be he was now entering the ranks of men who made their living at ball playing. And there is a great deal of difference between doing a thing for fun, and doing it to get your bread and butter—a heap of difference.

Joe stood on the edge of the diamond looking at the players. They seemed to be a clean-cut set of young fellows. One or two looked to be veterans at the game, and here and there Joe could pick out one whose hair was turning the least little bit gray. He wondered if they had slid down the scale, and, finding their powers waning, had gotten out of the big leagues to take it a little easier in one of the "bush" variety.

"But it's baseball—it's a start—it's just what

I want!" thought Joe, as he drew a deep breath, the odors of crushed green grass, the dry dust and the whiff of leather mingling under the hot rays of the Southern sun.

"It's baseball, and that's enough!" exulted Joe.

"Well, I see you got here!" exclaimed a voice behind him, and Joe turned to see "Jimmie" Mack, in uniform, holding out a welcoming hand.

"Yes," said Joe with a smile. "I'm a little late, but—I'm here."

"If the trains arrive on time down here everybody worries," went on Jimmie. "They think something is going to happen. Did you bring a uniform?"

Joe indicated his valise, into which he had hastily stuffed, at the hotel, one of his old suits.

"Well, slip it on—take any dressing room that's vacant there," and Jimmie motioned to the grandstand. "Then come out and I'll have you meet the boys. We're only doing light practice as yet, but we'll soon have to hump ourselves, for the season will shortly open."

"Is Mr. Gregory here?" asked Joe, feeling that he ought to meet the manager of the team.

"He'll be here before the day is over. Oh, Harrison!" he called to a passing player, "come over and meet Joe Matson, one of our new

pitchers. Harrison tries to play centre," explained the assistant manager with a smile.

"Quit your kiddin'!" exclaimed the centre fielder as he shook hands with Joe. "Glad to meet you, son. You mustn't mind Jimmie," he went on, "Ever played before?"

"Not professionally."

"That's what I meant."

"Joe's the boy who pitched Yale to the championship this year," explained Jimmie Mack.

"Oh, ho! Yes, I heard about that. Well, hope you like it here. I'm going out in the field. See you there," and Harrison passed on.

Joe lost no time in changing into his playing togs. The dressing rooms in the Montville grandstand were only apologies compared with what Joe was used to.

But he knew that this was only a training camp, and that they would not be here long.

He walked out on the field, feeling a little nervous and rather lonesome—"like a cat in a strange garret," as he wrote home to his folks. But Joe's school and college training stood him in good stead, and when he had been introduced to most of the players, who welcomed him warmly, he felt more at home.

Then he went out in the field, and began catching flies with the others.

"But I wish they'd put me at pitching," mused Joe. "That's what I want to do."

He was to learn that to make haste slowly is a motto more or less followed by professional ball players. There would be time enough to put on speed before the season closed.

CHAPTER V

THE CLASH

"THAT's the way! Line 'em out, now!"

"Put some speed into that!"

"Look out for a high one!"

"Oh, get farther back! I'm going to knock the cover off this time!"

These were only a few of the cries and calls that echoed over the ball field at Montville. The occasion was the daily practice of the Pittston nine, and orders had come from the manager and trainer to start in on more lively work. It was Joe's third day with the professionals.

He had made the acquaintance of all the players, but as yet had neither admitted, nor been admitted to, a real friendship with any of them. It was too early.

Joe held back because he was naturally a bit diffident. Then, too, most of the men were older than he, and with one exception they had been in the professional ranks for several seasons. That one exception was Charlie Hall, who played short.

He, like Joe, had been taken that Spring from the amateur ranks. Hall had played on a Western college team, and had been picked out by one of the ever-present professional scouts.

With Charlie, Joe felt more at home than with any of the others and yet he felt that soon he would have good friends among the older men.

On their part they did not become friendly with Joe at once simply for the reason that they wanted to "size him up," or "get his number," as Jimmie Mack put it in speaking of the matter.

"But they'll cotton to you after a bit, Joe," said the assistant manager, "and you'll like them, too. Don't get discouraged."

"I won't," was the answer.

There was one man on the team, though, with whom Joe felt that he would never be on friendly terms, and this was Jake Collin, one of the pitchers —the chief pitcher and mainstay of the nine on the mound, from what Joe picked up by hearing the other men talk. And Collin himself was not at all modest about his ability. That he had ability Joe was ready to concede. And Collin wanted everyone else to know it, too. He was always talking about his record, and his batting average, which, to do him credit, was good.

Collin was not much older than Joe, but a rather fast life and hard living counted for more than

years. Joe heard whispers that Collin could not last much longer.

Perhaps it was a realization of this that made Collin rather resent the arrival of our hero on the Pittston nine. For he gave Joe but a cold greeting, and, as he moved off to practice, the young pitcher could hear him saying something about "college dudes thinking they can play professional ball."

Joe's faced flushed, but he said nothing. It was something that called more for deeds than words.

"Everybody lively now! I want some snappy work!" called Jimmie Mack as the practice progressed. "If we're going to play the Montville team Saturday we want to snow them under. A win by a few runs won't be the thing at all, and, let me tell you, those boys can play ball.

"So step lively, everybody. Run bases as if you meant to get back home some time this week. Slug the ball until the cover comes off. And you, Collin, get a little more speed on your delivery. Is your arm sore?"

"Arm sore? I guess not! I'm all right!" and the man's eyes snapped angrily.

"Well, then, show it. Let's see what you've got up your sleeve, anyhow. Here comes Gregory now—he'll catch a few for you, and then we'll do some batting."

The manager, whom Joe had met and liked,

came out to join in the practice. He nodded to our hero, and then took Collin off to one side, to give him some instructions.

Joe under the direction of Jimmie Mack was allowed to do some pitching now. With Terry Hanson the left fielder, to back him up, Joe began throwing in the balls on a space in front of the grandstand.

Joe noticed that Collin regarded him sharply in the intervals of his own practice, but he was prepared for a little professional jealousy, and knew how to take it. He had seen it manifested often enough at school and college, though there the spirit of the university was paramount to personal triumph—every player was willing to sacrifice himself that the team might win. And, in a large measure, of course, this is so in professional baseball. But human nature is human nature, whether one is playing for money or for glory, and in perhaps no other sport where money counts for as much as it does in baseball, will you find more of the spirit of the school than in the ranks of the diamond professionals.

"Take it easy, Joe; take it easy," advised Terry, with a good-natured smile, as the lad stung in the balls. "You've got speed, and I'm willing to admit it without having you split my mitt. But save yourself for a game. You're not trying to

pitch anyone out now, you know, and there's no one looking at you."

"I guess I forgot this was just practice," admitted Joe with a laugh. "I'll throw in some easy ones."

He did, and saw an admiring look on Terry's face.

"They seem to have the punch—that's a nice little drop you've got. But don't work it too much. Vary your delivery."

From time to time as the practice proceeded Terry gave Joe good advice. Occasionally this would be supplemented by something Mack or Gregory would say and Joe took it all in, resolving to profit by it.

The practice came to an end, and the players were advised by their trainer, Mike McGuire, to take walks in the country round-about.

"It'll be good for your legs and wind," was the comment.

Joe enjoyed this almost as much as the work on the field, for the country was new to him and a source of constant delight. He went out with some of the men, and again would stroll off by himself.

Saturday, the day when the first practice game was to be played, found Joe a bit nervous. He wondered whether he would get a chance to pitch. So too, for that matter, did Tom Tooley, the

south-paw moundman, who was nearer Joe's age than was Collin.

"Who's going to be the battery?" was heard on all sides as the Pittston players went to the grounds.

"The old man hasn't given it out yet," was the reply of Jimmie Mack. The "old man" was always the manager, and the term conveyed no hint of disrespect.

The Montville team, a semi-professional one, was a good bit like the Silver Stars, Joe thought, when he saw the members run out on the diamond for practice. Still they looked to be a "husky lot," as he admitted, and he was glad of it, for he wanted to see what he and his team-mates could do against a good aggregation.

"Play ball! Play ball!" called the umpire, as he dusted off the home plate. There was quite a crowd present, and when Gregory handed over his batting list the umpire made the announcement:

"Batteries—for Pittston, Collin and Gregory. For Montville, Smith and Jennings."

"Um. He's going to pitch Collin," murmured Tooley in Joe's ear. "That means we warm the bench."

Joe was a little disappointed, but he tried not to show it.

This first game was neither better nor worse

than many others. Naturally the playing was ragged under the circumstances.

The Pittstons had everything to lose by being beaten and not much to gain if they won the game. On the other hand the home nine had much to gain in case they should win. So they took rather desperate chances.

Pittston was first at bat, and succeeded in getting two runs over. Then came a slump, and in quick succession three men went down, two being struck out. The Montville pitcher was a professional who had been in a big league, but who had drifted to a minor, and finally landed in the semi-pro ranks. But he had some good "heaves" left.

Collin walked to the mound with a rather bored air of superiority. There was a little whispered conference between him and the catcher-manager, and the second half of the first inning began.

Collin did well, and though hit twice for singles, not a run came in, and the home team was credited with a zero on the score-board.

"Oh, I guess we can play some!" cried one of the professionals.

"What are you crowing over?" demanded Jimmie Mack. "If we win this I suppose you fellows will want medals! Why this is nothing but a kid bunch we're up against."

"Don't let 'em fool you, though," advised the manager, who overheard the talk.

And then, to the surprise and dismay of all, the home team proceeded to "do things" to the professionals. They began making runs, and succeeded in stopping the winning streak of the Pittstons.

The detailed play would not interest you, and, for that matter it was a thing the Pittstons did not like to recall afterward. There was a bad slump, and when the seventh inning arrived Gregory called:

"Matson, you bat for Collin."

Joe felt the blood rush to his face.

"Does that mean I'm going to be taken out of the box?" asked the chief pitcher, stalking angrily over to the manager.

"It means just that, son. I can't afford to lose this game, and we sure will the way you're feedin' 'em in to 'em. I guess you drew it a little too fine the last few days. You need a rest."

"But—I—er—I——" protested Collin.

"That'll do," said Gregory, sharply. "Joe Matson will pitch. It's a chance, but I've got to take it."

"What's the matter with Tooley?" demanded Collin. "What do you want to go shove this raw college jake in ahead of us for? Say!"

"Go to the bench!" ordered the manager. "I know what I'm doing, Collin!"

The pitcher seemed about to say something, and the look he gave Joe was far from friendly. Then,

realizing that he was under the manager's orders, he stalked to the bench.

"You won't do this again, if I can prevent it!" snapped Collin at Joe, as he passed him. "I'll run you out of the league, if you try to come it over me!"

Only a few players heard him, and one or two whispered to him to quiet down, but he glared at Joe, who felt far from comfortable.

But he was to have his chance to pitch at last.

CHAPTER VI

A STRAIGHT THROW

Joe had hopes of making a safe hit when he came up, but pitchers are proverbially bad batsmen and our hero was no exception. I wish I could say that he "slammed one out for a home run, and came in amid wild applause," but truth compels me to state that Joe only knocked a little pop fly which dropped neatly into the hands of the second baseman, and Joe went back to the bench.

"Never mind," consoled Jimmie Mack, "you-'re not here to bat—we count on you to pitch, though of course if you can hit the ball do it—every time. But don't get nervous."

"I'm not," answered Joe.

And, to do him justice, his nerves were in excellent shape. He had not played on the school and Yale nines for nothing, and he had faced many a crisis fully as acute as the present one.

Then, too, the action of Collin must have had its effect. It was not pleasant for Joe to feel that he had won the enmity of the chief pitcher of the

nine. But our hero resolved to do his best and let other matters take care of themselves.

Whether it was the advent of Joe into the game, or because matters would have turned out that way anyhow, was not disclosed, but Pittston seemed to brace up, and that inning added three runs to their score, which put them on even terms with the home team—the members of which were playing phenomenal ball.

"And now we've got to go in and beat them!" exclaimed Manager Gregory, as his men took the field. "Joe, I want to see what you can do."

Enough to make any young pitcher nervous; was it not? Yet Joe kept his nerves in check—no easy matter—and walked to the box with all the ease he could muster.

He fingered the ball for a moment, rubbed a little dirt on it—not that the spheroid needed it, but it gave him a chance to look at Gregory and catch his signal for a fast out. He nodded comprehendingly, having mastered the signals, and wound up for his first delivery.

"Ball one!" howled the umpire.

Joe was a little nettled. He was sure it had gone cleanly over the plate, curving out just as he intended it should, and yet it was called a ball. But he concealed his chagrin, and caught the horsehide which Gregory threw back to him—the catch-

er hesitating just the least bit, and with a look at the umpire which said much.

Again came the signal for a fast out.

Joe nodded.

Once more the young pitcher threw and this time, though the batter swung desperately at it, not having moved his stick before, there came from the umpire the welcome cry of:

"Strike—one!"

Joe was beginning to make good.

I shall not weary you with a full account of the game. I have other, and more interesting contests to tell of as we proceed. Sufficient to say that while Joe did not "set the river afire," he did strike out three men that inning, after a two-bagger had been made. But Joe "tightened up," just in time to prevent a run coming in, and the score was still a tie when the last man was out.

In the next inning Pittston managed, by hard work, and a close decision on the part of the umpire, to add another run to their score. This put them one ahead, and the struggle now was to hold their opponents hitless. It devolved upon Joe to accomplish this.

And he did it.

Perhaps it was no great feat, as baseball history goes, but it meant much to him—a raw recruit in his first professional league, "bush" though it was. Joe made good, and when he struck out the

last man (one of the best hitters, too, by the way) there was an enthusiastic scene on that little ball field.

"Good, Joe! Good!" cried Jimmie Mack, and even the rather staid Mr. Gregory condescended to smile and say:

"I thought you could do it!"

Collin, suffering from his turn-down, sulked on the bench, and growled:

"I'll show that young upstart! He can't come here and walk over me."

"He didn't walk over you—he pitched over you," said George Lee, the second baseman. "He pitched good ball."

"Bah! Just a fluke! If I hadn't strained my arm yesterday I'd have made this home team look like a sick cat!"

"Post-mortems are out of style," said Lee. "Be a sport! It's all in the game!"

"Um!" growled Collin, surlily.

The team played the game all over again at the hotel that night. Of course it was not much of a victory, close as it was, but it showed of what stuff the players were made, and it gave many, who were ignorant of Joe's abilities, an insight into what he could do.

"Well, what do you think of my find?" asked Jimmie Mack of his chief that night.

"All right, Jimmie! All right! I think we'll make a ball-player of him yet."

"So do I. And the blessed part of it is that he hasn't got a swelled head from his college work. That's the saving grace of it. Yes, I think Joe is due to arrive soon."

If Joe had heard this perhaps he would have resented it somewhat. Surely, after having supplanted a veteran pitcher, even though of no great ability, and won his first professional game, Joe might have been excused for patting himself on the back, and feeling proud. And he did, too, in a sense.

But perhaps it was just as well he did not hear himself discussed. Anyhow, he was up in his room writing home.

The next day was Sunday, and in the afternoon Joe went for a long walk. He asked several of the men to go with him, but they all made good-enough excuses, so Joe set off by himself.

It was a beautiful day, a little too warm, but then that was to be expected in the South, and Joe was dressed for it. As he walked along a country road he came to a parting of the ways; a weather-beaten sign-post informed him that one highway led to North Ford, while the other would take him to Goldsboro.

"Goldsboro; eh?" mused Joe. "That's where that 'R. V.' fellow lives, who thought I robbed his

valise. I wonder if I'll ever meet him? I've a good notion to take a chance, and walk over that way. I can ask him if he found his stuff. Maybe it's risky, but I'm going to do it."

He set off at a swinging pace to limber up his muscles, thinking of many things, and wondering, if, after all, he was going to like professional baseball. Certainly he had started in as well as could be expected, save for the enmity of Collin.

Joe got out into the open country and breathed deeply of the sweet air. The road swept along in a gentle curve, on one side being deep woods, while on the other was a rather steep descent to the valley below. In places the road approached close to the edge of a steep cliff.

As the young pitcher strode along he heard behind him the clatter of hoofs. It was a galloping horse, and the rattle of wheels told that the animal was drawing a carriage.

"Someone's in a hurry," mused Joe. "Going for a doctor, maybe."

A moment later he saw what he knew might at any moment become a tragedy.

A spirited horse, attached to a light carriage, dashed around a bend in the road, coming straight for Joe. And in the carriage was a young girl, whose fear-blanched face told that she realized her danger. A broken, dangling rein showed that she had tried in vain to stop the runaway.

Joe formed a sudden resolve. He knew something of horses, and had more than once stopped a frightened animal. He ran forward, intending to cut across the path of this one, and grasp the bridle.

But as the horse headed for him, and caught sight of the youth, it swerved to one side, and dashed across an intervening field, straight for the steep cliff.

"Look out!" cried Joe, as if that meant anything.

The girl screamed, and seemed about to jump.

"I've got to stop that horse!" gasped Joe, and he broke into a run. Then the uselessness of this came to him and he stopped.

At his feet were several large, round and smooth stones. Hardly knowing why he picked up one, just as the horse turned sideways to him.

"If I could only hit him on the head, and stun him so that he'd stop before he gets to the cliff!" thought Joe. "If I don't he'll go over sure as fate!"

The next instant he threw.

Straight and true went the stone, and struck the horse hard on the head.

The animal reared, then staggered. It tried to keep on, but the blow had been a disabling one. It tried to keep on its legs but they crumpled under

THE STONE STRUCK THE HORSE HARD ON THE HEAD.

the beast, and the next moment it went down in a heap, almost on the verge of the steep descent.

The carriage swerved and ran partly up on the prostrate animal, while the shock of the sudden stop threw the girl out on the soft grass, where she lay in a crumpled heap.

Joe sprinted forward.

"I hope I did the right thing, after all," he panted. "I hope she isn't killed!"

CHAPTER VII

THE GIRL

JOE MATSON bent over the unconscious girl, and, even in the excitement of the moment, out of breath as he was from his fast run, he could not but note how pretty she was. Though now her cheeks that must usually be pink with the flush of health, were pale. She lay in a heap on the grass, at the side of the overturned carriage, from which the horse had partly freed itself. The animal was now showing signs of recovering from the stunning blow of the stone.

"I've got to get her away from here," decided Joe. "If that brute starts kicking around he may hurt her. I've got to pick her up and carry her. She doesn't look able to walk."

In his sturdy arms he picked up the unconscious girl, and carried her some distance off, placing her on a grassy bank.

"Let's see — what do you do when a girl faints?" mused Joe, scratching his head in puzzled fashion. "Water—that's it—you have to sprinkle her face with water."

He looked about for some sign of a brook or spring, and, listening, his ear caught a musical trickle off to one side.

"Must be a stream over there," he decided. He glanced again at the girl before leaving her. She gave no sign of returning consciousness, and one hand, Joe noticed when he carried her, hung limp, as though the wrist was broken.

"And she's lucky to get off with that," decided the young pitcher. "I hope I did the right thing by stopping the horse that way. She sure would have gone over the cliff if I hadn't."

The horse, from which had gone all desire to run farther, now struggled to its feet, and shook itself once or twice to adjust the harness. It was partly loose from it, and, with a plunge or two, soon wholly freed itself.

"Run away again if you want to now," exclaimed Joe, shaking his fist at the brute. "You can't hurt anyone but yourself, anyhow. Jump over the cliff if you like!"

But the horse did not seem to care for any such performance now, and, after shaking himself again, began nibbling the grass as though nothing had happened.

"All right," went on Joe, talking to the horse for companionship, since the neighborhood seemed deserted. "Stay there, old fellow. I may need

you to get to a doctor, or to some house. She may be badly hurt."

For want of something better Joe used the top of his cap in which to carry the water which he found in a clear-running brook, not far from where he had placed the girl.

The sprinkling of the first few drops of the cold liquid on her face caused her to open her eyes. Consciousness came back quickly, and, with a start, she gazed up at Joe uncomprehendingly.

"You're all right," he said, reassuringly. "That is, I hope so. Do you think you are hurt anywhere? Shall I get a doctor? Where do you live?"

Afterward he realized that his hurried questions had given her little chance to speak, but he meant to make her feel that she would be taken care of.

"What—what happened?" she faltered.

"Your horse ran away," Joe explained, with a smile. "He's over there now; not hurt, fortunately..

"Oh, I remember now! Something frightened Prince and he bolted. He never did it before. Oh, I was so frightened. I tried—tried to stop him, but could not. The rein broke."

The girl sat up now, Joe's arm about her, supporting her, for she was much in need of assistance, being weak and trembling.

"Then he bolted into a field," she resumed,

"and he was headed for a cliff. Oh, how I tried to stop him! But he wouldn't. Then—then something—something happened!"

She looked wonderingly at Joe.

"Yes, I'm afraid *I* happened it," he said with a smile. "I saw that your horse might go over the cliff, so I threw a stone, and hit him on the head. It stunned him, he fell, and threw you out."

"I remember up to that point," she said with a faint smile. "I saw Prince go down, and I thought we were going over the cliff. Oh, what an escape!"

"And yet not altogether an escape," remarked Joe. "Your arm seems hurt."

She glanced down in some surprise at her right wrist, as though noticing it for the first time. Then, as she moved it ever so slightly, a cry of pain escaped her lips.

"It—it's broken!" she faltered.

Joe took it tenderly in his hand.

"Only sprained, I think," he said, gravely. "It needs attention at once, though; I must get you a doctor. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

She struggled to her feet with his help, the red blood now surging into her pale cheeks, and making her, Joe thought, more beautiful than ever.

"Be careful!" he exclaimed, as she swayed. His arm was about her, so she did not fall.

"I—I guess I'm weaker than I thought," she murmured. "But it isn't because I'm injured—except my wrist. I think it must be the shock. Why, there's Prince!" she added, as she saw the grazing horse. "He isn't hurt!"

"No, I only stunned him with the stone I threw," said Joe.

"Oh, and so you threw a stone at him, and stopped him?" She seemed in somewhat of a daze.

"Yes."

"What a splendid thrower you must be!" There was admiration in her tones.

"It's from playing ball," explained Joe, modestly. "I'm a pitcher on the Pittston nine. We're training over at Montville."

"Oh," she murmured, understandingly.

"If I could get you some water to drink, it would make you feel better," said Joe. "Then I might patch up the broken harness and get you home. Do you live around here?"

"Yes, just outside of Goldsboro. Perhaps you could make a leaf answer for a cup," she suggested. "I believe I would like a little water. It would do me good."

She moistened her dry lips with her tongue as Joe hastened back to the little brook. He managed to curl an oak leaf into a rude but clean cup, and brought back a little water. The girl sipped

it gratefully, and the effect was apparent at once. She was able to stand alone.

"Now to see if I can get that horse of yours hitched to the carriage," spoke the young pitcher, "that is, if the carriage isn't broken."

"It's awfully kind of you, Mr.——" she paused suggestively.

"I'm Joe Matson, formerly of Yale," was our hero's answer, and, somehow, he felt not a little proud of that "Yale." After all, his university training, incomplete though it had been, was not to be despised.

"Oh, a Yale man!" her eyes were beginning to sparkle now.

"But I gave it up to enter professional baseball," the young pitcher went on. "It's my first attempt. If you do not feel able to get into the carriage—provided it's in running shape—perhaps I could take you to some house near here and send word to your folks," he suggested.

"Oh, I think I can ride—provided, as you say, the carriage is in shape to use," she answered, quickly. "I am Miss Varley. It's awfully good of you to take so much trouble."

"Not at all," protested Joe. He noticed a shadow of pain pass over her face, and she clasped her sprained wrist in her left hand.

"That must hurt a lot, Miss Varley," spoke Joe with warm sympathy. "I know what a sprain is.

I've had many a one. Let me wrap a cold, wet rag around it. That will do until you can get to a doctor and have him reduce it."

Not waiting for permission Joe hurried back to the brook, and dipped his handkerchief in the cold water. This he bound tightly around the already swelling wrist, tying it skillfully, for he knew something about first aid work—one needed to when one played ball for a living.

"That's better," she said, with a sigh of relief. "It's ever so much better. Oh, I don't know what would have happened if you had not been here!"

"Probably someone else would have done as well," laughed Joe. "Now about that carriage."

Prince looked up as the youth approached, and Joe saw a big bruise on the animal's head.

"Too bad, old fellow, that I had to do that," spoke Joe, for he loved animals. "No other way, though. I had to stop you."

A look showed him that the horse was not otherwise injured by the runaway, and another look showed him that it would be impossible to use the carriage. One of the wheels was broken.

"Here's a pickle!" cried Joe. "A whole bottle of 'em, for that matter. I can't get her home that way, and she can't very well walk. I can't carry her, either. I guess the only thing to do is to get her to the nearest house, and then go for help—or 'phone, if they have a wire. I'm in

for the day's adventure, I guess, but I can't leave her."

Not that he wanted to, for the more he was in the girl's presence, the more often he looked into her brown eyes, the more Joe felt that he was caring very much for Miss Varley.

"Come, Matson!" he chided himself, "don't be an idiot!"

"Well?" she questioned, as he came back to her.

"The carriage is broken," he told her. "Do you think you could walk to the nearest house?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it," she replied, and now she smiled, showing two rows of white, even teeth. "I'm feeling ever so much better. But perhaps I am keeping you," and she hung back.

"Not at all. I'm glad to be able to help you. I suppose I had better tie your horse."

"Perhaps."

As Joe turned back to the grazing animal there was the sound of a motor car out in the road. He and the girl turned quickly, the same thought in both their minds. Then a look of pleased surprise came over Miss Varley's face.

"Reggie! Reggie!" she called, waving her uninjured hand at a young man in the car. "Reggie, Prince bolted with me! Come over here!"

The machine was stopped with a screeching of brakes, and the young fellow leaped out.

"Why, Mabel!" he cried, as he came sprinting across the field. "Are you hurt? What happened? Dad got anxious about you being gone so long, and I said I'd look you up in my car. Are you hurt, Mabel?"

Joe made a mental note that of all names he liked best that of Mabel—especially when the owner had brown eyes.

"Only a sprained wrist, Reggie. This gentleman hit Prince with a stone and saved me from going over the cliff."

"Oh, he did!"

By this time the youth from the auto was beside Joe and the girl. The two young men faced each other. Joe gave a gasp of surprise that was echoed by the other, for the youth confronting our hero was none other than he who had accused Joe of robbing that odd valise.

CHAPTER VIII

A PARTING

"WHY—er—that is—I'm awfully obliged to you, of course, for saving my sister," spoke the newcomer—his name must be Reggie Varley, Joe rightly decided. "Very much obliged, old man, and—er——"

He paused, evidently quite embarrassed.

"You two act as though you had met before," said Miss Varley, with a smile. "Have you?"

"Once," spoke Joe, drily. "I did not know your brother's name then." He did not add that he was glad to find that he was Mabel's brother, and not a more distant relation.

"How strange that you two should have met," went on Mabel Varley.

"Yes," returned Joe, "and it was under rather strange circumstances. It was while I was on my way down here to join the ball team, and your brother thought——"

"Ahem!" exclaimed Reggie, with a meaning look at Joe. "I—er—you'd better get in here

with me, Mabel, and let me get you home. Perhaps this gentleman——"

"His name is Joe Matson," spoke the girl, quickly.

"Perhaps Mr. Matson will come home with—us," went on Reggie. Obviously it was an effort to extend this invitation, but he could do no less under the circumstances. Joe felt this and said quickly:

"No, thank you, not this time."

"Oh, but I want papa and mamma to meet you!" exclaimed Mabel, impulsively. "They'll want to thank you. Just think, Reggie, he saved my life. Prince was headed for the cliff, and he stopped him."

There were tears in her eyes as she gazed at Joe.

"It was awfully good and clever of you, old man," said Reggie, rather affectedly, yet it was but his way. "I'm sure I appreciate it very much. And we'd like—my sister and I—we'd like awfully to have you come on and take lunch with us. I can put the horse up somewhere around here, I dare say, and we can go on in my car."

"The carriage is broken Reggie," Mabel informed him.

"Too bad. I'll send Jake for it later. Will you come?"

He seemed to wish to ignore, or at least post-

pone, the matter of the valise and his accusation. Perhaps he felt how unjust it had been. Joe realized Reggie's position.

"No, thank you," spoke the young pitcher. "I must be getting back to my hotel. I was just out for a walk. Some other time, perhaps. If you like, I'll try and put the horse in some near-by barn for you, and I'll drop you a card, saying where it is."

"Will you really, old man?" asked Reggie, eagerly. "It will be awfully decent of you, after —well, I'd appreciate it very much. Then I could get my sister home, and to a doctor."

"Which I think would be a wise thing to do," remarked Joe. "Her wrist seems quite badly sprained. I'll attend to the horse. So now I'll say good-bye."

He turned away. He and Reggie had not shaken hands. In spite of the service Joe had rendered he could not help feeling that young Varley harbored some resentment against him.

"And if it's her jewelry that is missing, with his watch, and he tells her that he suspects me—I wonder how she'll feel afterward?" mused Joe. "I wonder?"

Mabel held out her uninjured hand, and Joe took it eagerly. The warm, soft pressure lingered for some little time afterward in his hardened palm—a palm roughened by baseball play.

"Good-bye," she said, softly. "I can't thank you enough—now. You must come and get the rest—later."

"I will," he said, eagerly.

"Here is my card—it has our address," spoke Reggie holding out a small, white square. "I trust you will come—soon."

"I shall try," said Joe, with a peculiar look at his accuser. "And I'll drop you a card about the horse."

Reggie helped his sister into the auto, and they drove off, Mabel waving a good-bye to Joe. The latter stood for a minute in the field, looking at the disappearing auto. Then he murmured, probably to the horse, for there was no other sign of life in sight:

"Well, you've gone and done it, Matson! You've gone and done it!"

But Joe did not admit, even to himself, what he had gone and done.

Prince seemed tractable enough after his recent escapade, and made no objection to Joe leading him out to the road. The young pitcher soon came to a farmhouse, where, when he had explained matters, the man readily agreed to stable the animal until it should be called for.

And, as Joe Matson trudged back to the hotel he said, more than once to himself:

"You've gone and done it, old man! You've gone and done it!"

And a little later, as Joe thought of the look on Reggie's face when he recognized the youth he had accused, our hero chuckled inwardly.

"He didn't know what to do," mused Joe. "I sure had him buffaloed, as the boys say."

Joe was welcomed by his fellow players on his return to the hotel. It was nearly meal time, but before going down to the dining room Joe wrote a short note giving the name of the farmer where he had left the horse.

"Let's see now," mused our hero. "To whom shall I send it—to him—or—her."

When he dropped the letter in the mail box the envelope bore the superscription—"Miss Mabel Varley."

Practice was resumed Monday morning, and Joe could note that there was a tightening up all along the line. The orders from the manager and his assistant came sharper and quicker.

"I want you boys to get right on edge!" exclaimed Gregory. "We'll play our opening game in Pittston in two weeks now. We'll cross bats with Clevefield, last season's pennant winners, and we want to down them. I'm getting tired of being in the ruck. I want to be on top of the heap."

Joe, from his study of the baseball "dope,"

knew that Pittston had not made a very creditable showing the last season.

The practice was sharp and snappy, and there was a general improvement all along the line. Joe was given several try-outs in the next few days, and while he received no extravagant praise he knew that his work pleased. Jake Collin still held his enmity against Joe, and perhaps it was but natural.

Wet grounds, a day or so later, prevented practice, and Joe took advantage of it to call on the girl he had rescued. He found her home, her wrist still bandaged, and she welcomed him warmly, introducing him to her mother. Joe was made to feel quite at home, and he realized that Reggie had said nothing about the articles missing from the valise—or, at least, had not mentioned the accusation against Joe.

"Will you tell me how, and when, you met my brother?" asked Mabel, after some general talk.

"Hasn't he told you?" inquired Joe, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"No, he keeps putting it off."

"Then perhaps I'd better not tell," said Joe.

"Oh, Mr. Matson, I think you're horrid! Is there some reason I shouldn't know?"

"Not as far as I am concerned. But I'd rather your brother would tell."

"Then I'm going to make him when he comes home."

Joe was rather glad Reggie was not there then. For, in spite of everything, Joe knew there would be a feeling of embarrassment on both sides.

"I have come to say good-bye," he said to the girl. "We leave for the North, soon, and the rest of the season will be filled with traveling about."

"I'm sorry you're going," she said, frankly.

"Are you?" he asked, softly. "Perhaps you will allow me to write to you."

"I'd be glad to have you," she replied, warmly, and she gave him a quick glance. "Perhaps I may see you play sometime; I love baseball!"

"I'm very glad," returned Joe, and, after a while—rather a long while, to speak the truth—he said good-bye.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST LEAGUE GAME

"ALL aboard!"

"Good-bye, everybody!"

"See you next Spring!"

"Good-bye!"

These were some of the calls heard at the Montville station as the Pittston ball team left their training grounds for the trip to their home city, where the league season would start. Joe had been South about three weeks, and had made a few friends there. These waved a farewell to him, as others did to other players, as the train pulled out.

Joe was not sure, but he thought he saw, amid the throng, the face of a certain girl. At any rate a white handkerchief was waved directly at him.

"Ah, ha! Something doing!" joked Charlie Hall, with whom Joe had struck up quite a friendship. "Who's the fair one, Joe?"

"I didn't see her face," was the evasive answer.

"Oh, come now! That's too thin! She's evidently taken a liking to you."

"I hope she has!" exclaimed the young pitcher,

and then blushed at his boldness. As the train pulled past the station he had a full view of the girl waving at him. She was Mabel Varley. Charlie saw her also.

"My word!" he cried. "I congratulate you, old man!" and he clapped Joe on the shoulder.

"Cut it out!" came the retort, as Joe turned his reddened face in the direction of the girl. And he waved back, while some of the other players laughed.

"Better be looking for someone to sign in Matson's place soon, Mack," remarked John Holme, the third baseman, with a chuckle. "He's going to trot in double harness if I know any of the symptoms."

"All right," laughed the assistant manager. "I'll have to begin scouting again, I suppose. Too bad, just as Joe is going to make good."

"Oh, don't worry," advised our hero coolly. "I'm going to play."

The trip up was much more enjoyable than Joe had found the one down, when he came alone. He was beginning to know and like nearly all of his team-mates—that is, all save Collin, and it was due only to the latter's surly disposition that Joe could not be friendly with him.

"Think you'll stay in this business long?" asked Charlie of Joe as he sank into the seat beside him.

"Well, I expect to make it my business—if I can make good."

"I think you will."

"But I don't intend to stay in this small league forever," went on Joe. "I'd like to get in a major one."

"That isn't as easy as it seems," said the other college lad. "You know you're sort of tied hand and foot once you sign with a professional team."

"How's that?"

"Why, there is a sort of national agreement, you know. No team in any league will take a player from another team unless the manager of that team gives the player his release. That is, you can quit playing ball, of course; but, for the life of you, you can't get in any other professional team until you are allowed to by the man with whom you signed first."

"Well, of course, I've read about players being given their release, and being sold or traded from one team to another," spoke Joe, "but I didn't think it was as close as that."

"It is close," said Hall, "a regular 'trust.' Modern professional baseball is really a trust. There's a gentleman's agreement in regard to players that's never broken. I'm sorry, in a way, that I didn't stay an amateur. I, also, want to get into a big league, but the worst of it is that if you show up well in a small league, and prove a draw-

ing card, the manager won't release you. And until he does no other manager would hire you. Though, of course, the double A leagues can draft anyone they like."

Joe whistled softly.

"Then it isn't going to be so easy to get into another league as I thought," he said.

"Not unless something happens," replied his team-mate. "Of course, if another manager wanted you badly enough he would pay the price, and buy you from this club. High prices have been paid, too. There's Marquard—the Giants gave ten thousand dollars to have him play for them."

"Yes, I heard about that," spoke Joe, "but I supposed it was mostly talk."

"There's a good deal more than talk," asserted Charlie. "Though it's a great advertisement for a man. Think of being worth ten thousand dollars more than your salary!"

"And he didn't get the ten," commented Joe.

"No. That's the worst of it. We're the slaves of baseball, in a way."

"Oh, well, I don't mind being that kind of a slave," said Joe, laughingly.

He lay back in his seat as the train whirled on, and before him, as he closed his eyes, he could see a girl's face—the face of Mabel Varley.

"I wonder if her brother told her?" mused the young pitcher. "If he did she may think just as

he did—that I had a hand in looting that valise. Oh, pshaw! I'm not going to think about it. And yet I wish the mystery was cleared up—I sure do!"

The training had done all the players good. They were right "on edge" and eager to get into the fray. Not a little horse-play was indulged in on the way North. The team had a car to itself, and so felt more freedom than otherwise would have been the case.

Terry Blake, the little "mascot" of the nine, was a great favorite, and he and Joe soon became fast friends.

Terry liked to play tricks on the men who made so much of him, and late that first afternoon he stole up behind Jake Collin, who had fallen asleep, and tickled his face with a bit of paper. At first the pitcher seemed to think it was a troublesome fly, and his half-awake endeavors to get rid of it amused Terry and some others who were watching.

Then, as the tickling was persisted in, Collin awoke with a start. He had the name of waking up cross and ugly, and this time was no exception. As he started up he caught sight of the little mascot, and understood what had been going on.

"You brat!" he cried, leaping out into the aisle. Terry fled, with frightened face, and Collin ran

after him. "I'll punch you for that!" cried the pitcher.

"Oh, can't you take a joke?" someone asked him, but Collin paid no heed. He raced after poor little Terry, who had meant no harm, and the mascot might have come to grief had not Joe stepped out into the aisle of the car and confronted Collin.

"Let me past! Let me get at him!" stormed the man.

"No, not now," was Joe's quiet answer.

"Out of my way, you whipper-snapper, or I'll——"

He drew back his arm, his fist clenched, but Joe never quailed. He looked Collin straight in the eyes, and the man's arm went down. Joe was smaller than he, but the young pitcher was no weakling.

"That'll do, Collin," said Jimmie Mack, quietly. "The boy only meant it for a joke."

Collin did not answer. But as he turned aside to go back to his seat he gave Joe a black look. There was an under-current of unpleasant feeling over the incident during the remainder of the trip.

Little Terry stole up to Joe, when the players came back from the dining-car, and, slipped his small hand into that of the pitcher.

"I—I like you," he said, softly.

"Do you?" asked Joe with smile. "I'm glad of that, Terry."

"And I'll always see that you have the bat you want when you want it," went on the little mascot. Poor little chap, he was an orphan, and Gus Harrison, the big centre fielder, had practically adopted him. Then he was made the official mascot, and while perhaps the constant association with the ball players was not altogether good for the small lad, still he might have been worse off.

Pittston was reached in due season, no happenings worth chronicling taking place on the way. Joe was eager to see what sort of a ball field the team owned, and he was not disappointed when, early the morning after his arrival, he and the others went out to it for practice.

It was far from being the New York Polo Grounds, nor was the field equal to the one at Yale, but Joe had learned to take matters as they came, and he never forgot that he was only with a minor league.

"Time enough to look for grounds laid out with a rule and compass when I get into a major league," he told himself. "That is, if I can get my release."

Joe found some letters from home awaiting him at the hotel where the team had its official home. But, before he answered them he wrote to Mabel. I wonder if we ought to blame him?

The more Joe saw of his team-mates the more he liked them—save Collin, and that was no fault of the young pitcher. He found Pittston a pleasant place, and the citizens ardent "fans." They thought their team was about as good as any in that section, and, though it had not captured the pennant, there were hopes that it would come to Pittston that season.

"They're good rooters!" exclaimed Jimmie Mack. "I will say that for this Pittston bunch. They may not be such a muchness otherwise, but they're good rooters, and it's a pleasure to play ball here. They warm you up, and make you do your best."

Joe was glad to hear this.

The new grounds were a little strange to him, at first, but he soon became used to them after one or two days' practice. Nearly all the other players, of course, were more at home.

"And now, boys," said Manager Gregory, when practice had closed one day. "I want you to do your prettiest to-morrow. I've got a good team—I know it. Some of you are new to me, but I've heard about you, and I'm banking on your making good. I want you to wallop Clevefield to-morrow. I want every man to do his best, and don't want any hard feelings if I play one man instead of another. I have reasons for

it. Now that's my last word to you. I want you to win."

There was a little nervous feeling among the players as the time for the first league game drew near. A number of the men had been bought from other clubs. There was one former Clevefield player on the Pittston team, and also one from the pennant club of a previous year.

That night Joe spent some time studying the batting averages of the opposing team, and also he read as much of their history as he could get hold of. He wanted to know the characteristics of the various batters if he should be fortunate enough to face them from the pitching mound.

There was the blare of a band, roars of cheers, and much excitement. The official opening of the league season was always an event in Pittston, as it is in most large cities. The team left their hotel in a body, going to the grounds in large 'bus, which was decorated with flags. A mounted police escort had been provided, and a large throng, mostly boys, marched to the grounds, accompanying the players.

There another demonstration took place as the home team paraded over the diamond, and greeted their opponents, who were already on hand, an ovation having also been accorded to them.

The band played again, there were more cheers and encouraging calls, and then the Mayor of the

city stepped forward to throw the first ball. Clevefield was to bat first, the home team, in league games, always coming up last.

The initial ball, of course, was only a matter of form, and the batter only pretended to strike at it.

Then came the announcement all were waiting for; the naming of the Pittston battery.

"For Clevefield," announced the umpire, "McGuinness and Sullivan. For Pittston, Matson and Nelson."

Joe had been picked to open the battle, and Nelson, who was the regular catcher, except when Gregory took a hand, would back him up. Joe's ears rang as he walked to the mound.

"Play ball!" droned the umpire.

CHAPTER X

BITTERNESS

Joe glanced over to where Gregory sat on the bench, from which he would engineer this first game of the season. The manager caught the eye of the young pitcher, and something in Joe's manner must have told the veteran that his latest recruit was nervous. He signalled to Joe to try a few practice balls, and our hero nodded comprehensively.

The batter stepped back from the plate, and Joe thought he detected a smile of derision at his own newness, and perhaps rawness.

"But I'll show him!" whispered Joe fiercely to himself, as he clinched his teeth and stung in the ball. It landed in the mitt of the catcher with a resounding thud.

"That's the boy!" called Gregory to him. "You'll do, old man. Sting in another."

Joe threw with all his force, but there was a sickening fear in his heart that he was not keeping good control over the ball. Nelson signalled to

him to hold his curves in a little more, and Joe nodded to show he understood.

"Play ball!" drawled the umpire again, and the batter took his place at the plate.

Joe looked at the man, and reviewing the baseball "dope" he recalled that the player batted well over .300, and was regarded as the despair of many pitchers.

"If I could only strike him out!" thought Joe.

His first ball went a little wild. He realized that it was going to be a poor one as soon as it left his hand, but he could not for the life of him recover in time.

"Ball one!" yelled the umpire.

"That's the way!"

"Make him give you what you want!"

"Wait for a pretty one!"

"That's their ten thousand dollar college pitcher! Back to the bench for his!"

These were only a few of the remarks, sarcastic and otherwise, that greeted Joe's first performance. He felt the hot blood rush to his face, and then, as he stepped forward to receive the ball which the catcher tossed back to him, he tried to master his feelings. The catcher shook his head in a certain way, to signal to Joe to be on his guard. Joe looked over at Gregory, who did not glance at him.

"I'll do better this time!" whispered Joe, fiercely.

He deliberated a moment before hurling in the next ball.

"Here goes a home run! Clout it over the fence, Pike!" called an enthusiastic "fan" in a shrill voice and the crowd laughed.

"Not if I know it!" muttered Joe.

The ball clipped the corner of the plate cleanly, and the batter, who had made a half motion to hit at it, refrained.

"Strike one!" yelled the umpire, throwing up his arm.

"That's the way, Matson!"

"Two more like that and he's a dead one!"

Joe caught the signal for a drop, but shook his head. He was going to try another out. Again his catcher signalled for a drop, but Joe was, perhaps, a trifle obstinate. He felt that he had been successful once with an out, and he was going to do it again. The catcher finally nodded in agreement, though reluctantly.

Joe shot in a fast one, and he knew that he had the ball under perfect control. Perhaps he was as disappointed as any of the home players when there came a resounding crack, and the white sphere sailed aloft, and well out over centre field.

"That's the way, Pike! Two bags anyhow!"

But the redoubtable Pike was to have no such

good fortune, for the centre fielder, after a heart-breaking run, got under the fly and caught it, winning much applause from the crowd for his plucky effort.

"One down!" called Gregory, cheerfully. "Only two more, Joe."

Joe wished that he had struck out his man, but it was some consolation to know that he was being supported by good fielding.

The next man up had a ball and a strike called on him, and Joe was a bit puzzled as to just what to offer. He decided on a swift in, and thought it was going to make good, but the batter was a crafty veteran, and managed to connect with the ball. He sent a swift liner which the shortstop gathered in, however, and there was another added to the list of outs.

"One more and that'll be about all!" called the Pittston catcher. Joe threw the ball over to first for a little practice, while the next batter was picking out his stick, and then came another try.

"I've got to strike him out!" decided the young pitcher. "I've got to make good!"

His heart was fluttering, and his nerves were not as calm as they ought to have been. He stooped over and made a pretence of tying his shoe-lace. When he straightened up he had, in a measure, gained a mastery of himself. He felt cool and collected.

In went the ball with certain aim, and Joe knew that it was just what he had intended it should be.

"Strike!" called the umpire, though the batter had not moved. There was some laughter from the grandstand, and the batter tapped the plate nervously. Joe smiled.

"Good work!" called Gregory from the bench.

Again the ball went sailing in, but this time Joe's luck played him a shabby trick, or perhaps the umpire was not watching closely. Certainly Joe thought it a strike, but "ball" was called. Joe sent in the next one so quickly that the batter was scarcely prepared for it. But it was perfectly legitimate and the umpire howled:

"Strike two!"

"That's the boy!"

"Good work!"

"Another like that now, Joe!"

Thus cried the throng. Gregory looked pleased.

"I guess Mack didn't make any mistake picking him up," he said.

The batter knocked a little foul next, that the catcher tried in vain to get. And then, when he faced Joe again, our hero sent in such a puzzling drop that the man was deceived and struck out.

"That's the boy!"

"What do you think of our ten thousand dollar college pitcher now?"

"Come on, Clevefield! He's got some more just like that!"

The home team and its supporters were jubilant, and Joe felt a sense of elation as he walked in to the bench.

"Now see what my opponent can do," he murmured.

McGuinness was an old time pitcher, nothing very remarkable, but one any small club would be glad to get. He had the "number" of most of the Pittston players, and served them balls and strikes in such order that though two little pop flies were knocked no one made a run. The result of the first inning was a zero for each team.

"Now Joe, be a little more careful, and I think you can get three good ones," said Gregory, as his team again took the field.

"I'll try," replied Joe, earnestly.

He got two men, but not the third, who knocked a clean two-bagger, amid enthusiastic howls from admiring "fans."

This two-base hit seemed to spell Joe's undoing, for the next man duplicated and the first run was scored. There were two out, and it looked as though Clevefield had struck a winning streak, for the next man knocked what looked to be good for single. But Bob Newton, the right fielder, caught it, and the side was retired with one run.

Pittston tried hard to score, but the crafty pitcher, aided by effective fielding, shut them out, and another zero was their portion on the score board.

"Joe, we've got to get 'em!" exclaimed Gregory, earnestly.

"I'll try!" was the sturdy answer.

It was heart-breaking, though, when the first man up singled, and then came a hit and run play. Joe was not the only player on the Pittston team who rather lost his head that inning. For, though Joe was hit badly, others made errors, and the net result was that Clevefield had four runs to add to the one, while Pittston had none.

They managed, however, to get two in the following inning, more by good luck than good management, and the game began to look, as Jimmie Mack said, as though the other team had it in the "refrigerator."

How it happened Joe never knew, but he seemed to go to pieces. Probably it was all a case of nerves, and the realization that this game meant more to him than any college contest.

However that may be, the result was that Joe was effectively hit the next inning, and when it was over, and three more runs had come in, Gregory said sharply:

"Collin, you'll pitch now!"

It meant that Joe had been "knocked out of the box."

"We've got to get this game!" explained the manager, not unkindly. But Joe felt, with bitterness in his heart, that he had failed.

CHAPTER XI

OLD POP CONSOLES

COLLIN flashed a look of mingled scorn and triumph on Joe as he walked past him. It needed only this to make our hero feel that he had stood about all he could, and he turned away, and tried to get rid of a lump in his throat.

None of the other players seemed to notice him. Probably it was an old story to them. Competition was too fierce—it was a matter of making a living on their part—every man was for himself, in a certain sense. They had seen young players come and old players go. It was only a question of time when they themselves would go—go never to come back into baseball again. They might eke out a livelihood as a scout or as a ground-keeper in some big league. It was a fight for the survival of the fittest, and Joe's seeming failure brought no apparent sympathy.

Understand me, I am not speaking against organized baseball. It is a grand thing, and one of the cleanest sports in the world. But what I am trying to point out is that it is a business, and

from a business standpoint everyone in it must do his best for himself. Each man, in a sense, is concerned only with his own success. Nor do I mean that this precludes a love of the club, and good team work. Far from it.

Nor were Joe's feelings made any the less poignant by the fact that Collin did some wonderful pitching. He needed to in order to pull the home team out of the hole into which it had slipped—and not altogether through Joe's weakness, either.

Perhaps the other players braced up when they saw the veteran Collin in the box. Perhaps he even pitched better than usual because he had, in a sense, been humiliated by Joe's preference over himself. At any rate, whatever the reason, the answer was found in the fact that Pittston began to wake up.

Collin held the other team hitless for one inning, and the rest of the game, ordinary in a sense, saw Pittston march on to victory—a small enough victory—by a margin of two runs, but that was enough. For victory had come out of almost sure defeat.

Poor Joe sat on the bench and brooded. For a time no one seemed to take any notice of him, and then Gregory, good general that he was, turned to the new recruit and said:

"You mustn't mind a little thing like that, Joe.

I have to do the best as I see it. This is business, you know. Why, I'd have pulled Collin out, or Tooley, just as quick."

"I know it," returned Joe, thickly.

But the knowledge did not add to his comfort, though he tried to make it do so.

But I am getting a little ahead of my story.

The game was almost over, and it was practically won by Pittston, when a voice spoke back of where Joe sat on the players' bench. It was a husky, uncertain, hesitating sort of voice and it said, in the ear of the young pitcher:

"Never mind, my lad. Ten years from now, when you're in a big league, you'll forget all about this. It'll do you good, anyhow, for it'll make you work harder, and hard work makes a good ball player out of a middle-class one. Brace up. I know what I'm talking about!"

Joe hesitated a moment before turning. Somehow he had a vague feeling that he had heard that voice before, and under strange circumstances. He wanted to see if he could place it before looking at the speaker.

But it was baffling, and Joe turned quickly. He started as he saw standing behind him, attired rather more neatly than when last he had confronted our hero—the tramp whom he had saved from the freight train.

On his part the other looked sharply at Joe for

a moment. Over his face passed shadows of memory, and then the light came. He recognized Joe, and with a note of gladness in his husky voice —husky from much shouting on the ball field, and from a reckless life—he exclaimed:

"Why it's the boy! It's the boy who pulled me off the track! It's the boy!"

"Of course!" exclaimed Joe. Impulsively he held out his hand.

A shout arose as one of the Pittston players brought in the winning run, but Joe paid no heed. He was staring at old Pop Dutton.

The other player—the "has-been"—looked at Joe's extended hand a moment as if in doubt. Then he glanced over the field, and listened to the glad cries. He seemed to straighten up, and his nostrils widened as he sniffed in the odors of the crushed green grass. It was as though a broken-down horse had heard from afar the battle-riot in which he never again would take part.

Back came the blood-shot eyes to Joe's still extended hand.

"Do you—do you mean it?" faltered the old ball player.

"Mean it? Mean what?" asked Joe, in surprise.

"Are you going to shake hands with me—with a——"

He did not finish his obvious sentence.

"Why not?" asked Joe.

The other did not need to answer, for at that moment Gregory came up. He started at the sight of Dutton, and said sharply:

"How did you get in here? What are you doing here. Didn't I tell you to keep away?"

"I paid my way in—*Mister* Gregory!" was the sarcastic answer. "I still have the price."

"Well, we don't care for your money. What are you doing here? The bleachers for yours!"

"He came—I think he came to see me," spoke Joe, softly, and he reached for the other's reluctant hand. "I have met him before."

"Oh," said Gregory, and there was a queer note in his voice. "I guess we've all met him before, and none of us are the better for it. You probably don't know him as well as the rest of us, Joe."

"He—he saved my life," faltered the unfortunate old ball player.

"In a way that was a pity," returned Gregory, coolly—cuttingly, Joe thought, "for you're no good to yourself, Dutton, nor to anyone else, as near as I can make out. I told you I didn't want you hanging around my grounds, and I don't. Now be off! If I find you here again I'll hand you over to the police!"

Joe expected an outburst from Dutton, but the man's spirit was evidently broken. For an instant—just for an instant—he straightened up and

looked full at Gregory. Then he seemed to shrink in his clothes and turned to shuffle away.

"All—all right," he mumbled. "I'll keep away. But you've got one fine little pitcher in that boy, and I didn't want to see him lose his nerve and get discouraged—as I often did. That—that's why I spoke to him."

Poor Joe felt that he had rather made a mess of it in speaking to Dutton, but, he said afterward, he would have done the same thing over again.

"You needn't worry about Matson," said the manager, with a sneer. "I'll look after Joe—I'll see that he doesn't lose his nerve—or get discouraged."

"I—I hope you do," said the old player, and then, with uncertain gait, he walked off as the victorious Pittston players swarmed in. The game was over.

CHAPTER XII

THE QUEER VALISE

"MATSON, I hope you didn't misunderstand me," remarked the manager as he walked beside Joe to the dressing rooms. "I mean in regard to that Dutton. He's an intolerable nuisance, and I didn't want you to get mixed up with him. Perhaps I spoke stronger than I should, but I'm exasperated with him. I've tried—and so have lots of us—to get him back on the right road again, but I'm afraid he's hopeless."

"It's too bad!" burst out the young pitcher. "Yes, I thought you were a little severe with him."

"I have to be. I don't want him hanging around here. I haven't seen him for some time. He drifts all about—beating his way like a tramp, I guess, though he's better dressed now than in a long while. What's that he said about you saving his life?"

"Well, I suppose I did, in a way," and Joe told of the freight train episode. "But that happened a long distance from here," he added. "I was surprised to turn around and see him."

"Oh, Pop travels all over. You've probably heard about him. In his day there wasn't a better pitcher in any league. But he got careless—that, bad companions and dissipation spelled ruin for him. He's down and out now, and I'm sure he can never come back. He lives off what he can borrow or beg from those who used to be his friends. Steer clear of him—that's my advice."

Joe did not respond and after a moment Gregory went on with:

"And you musn't mind, Joe, being taken out of to-day's game."

"Oh, I didn't—after the first."

"It was for your own good, as well as for the good of the team," proceeded the manager. "If I hadn't taken you out you might have gone to pieces, and the crowd would have said mean things that are hard to forget. And I want you to pitch for us to-morrow, Joe."

"You do!" cried the delighted young pitcher, all his bitterness forgotten now. "I thought maybe——"

He paused in confusion.

"Just because you got a little off to-day, did you imagine I was willing to give you your release?" asked Gregory, with a smile.

"Well—something like that," confessed Joe.

The manager laughed.

"Don't take it so seriously," he advised.

"You've got lots to learn yet about professional baseball, and I want you to learn it right."

Joe felt a sense of gratitude, and when he reached the hotel that afternoon, he took a refreshing shower bath, attired himself in his "glad rags," and bought a ticket to the theatre.

Then, before supper, he sat down to write home, enclosing some of his salary to be put in a savings bank at Riverside. Joe also wrote a glowing account of the game, even though his part in it was rather negligible. He also wrote to— But there! I shouldn't tell secrets that way. It's taking too much of an advantage over a fellow.

There was an air of elation about the hotel where the players lived, and on all sides were heard congratulations. The evening papers had big headlines with the victory of the home team displayed prominently. Collin's picture was there, and how much Joe wished that his own was so displayed only he himself knew.

Clevefield played four games with Pittston, and they broke even—each side winning two. Joe was given another chance to pitch, and was mainly responsible for winning the second game for his team.

Joe was fast becoming accustomed to his new life. Of course there was always something different coming up—some new problem to be met. But he got in the way of solving them. It was

different from his life at boarding school, and different from his terms at Yale. He missed the pleasant, youthful comradeship of both places, but he found, as he grew to know them better, some sterling men in his own team, and in those of the opposing clubs.

But with all that, at times, Joe felt rather lonesome. Of course the days were busy ones, either at practice or in play. But his nights were his own, and often he had no one with whom he cared to go out.

He and Charlie Hall grew more and more friendly, but it was not a companionship of long enough standing to make it the kind Joe really cared for.

He had much pleasure in writing home, and to Mabel, who in turn, sent interesting letters of her life in the South. One letter in particular made Joe rather eager.

"My brother and I are coming North on a combined business and pleasure trip," she wrote, "and we may see your team play. We expect to be in Newkirk on the twentieth."

Joe dropped everything to look eagerly at the official schedule.

"Well, of all the luck!" he cried. "We play in Newkirk that date. I wonder if she knew it? I wonder——?"

Then for days Joe almost prayed that there

would be no rainy days—no upsetting of the schedule that would necessitate double-headers, or anything that would interfere with playing at Newkirk on the date mentioned. That city, as he found by looking at a map, was on a direct railroad line from Goldsboro.

"I hope nothing slips up!" murmured the young pitcher. From then on he lived in a sort of rosy glow.

The ball season of the Central League was well under way now. A number of games had been played, necessitating travel from one city to another. Some of the journeys Joe liked, and some were tiresome. He met all sorts and conditions of men and was growing to be able to take things as he found them.

Joe worked hard, and he took a defeat more to heart than did any of the others. It seemed to be all in the day's work with them. With Joe it was a little more. Not that any of the players were careless, though. They were more sophisticated, rather.

The third week of the season, then, found Pittston third in line for pennant honors, and when the loss of a contest to Buffington had set them at the end of the first division there were some rather glum-looking faces seen in the hotel corridor.

"Boys, we've got to take a brace!" exclaimed Gregory, and the manner in which he said it told

his men that he meant it. Joe went to bed that night wildly resolving to do all sorts of impossible things, so it is no wonder he dreamed that he pitched a no-hit no-run game, and was carried in triumph around the diamond on the shoulders of his enthusiastic comrades.

I shall not weary you with an account of the ordinary games. Just so many had to be played in a certain order to fulfill the league conditions. Some of the contests were brilliant affairs, and others dragged themselves out wearily.

Joe had his share in the good and bad, but, through it all, he was gradually acquiring a good working knowledge of professional baseball. He was getting better control of his curves, and he was getting up speed so that it was noticeable.

"I'll have to get Nelson a mitt with a deeper pit in it if you keep on," said Gregory with a laugh, after one exciting contest when Joe had fairly "pitched his head off," and the game had been won for Pittston by a narrow margin.

Gradually Joe's team crept up until it was second, with Clevefield still at the head.

"And our next game is with Newkirk!" exulted Joe one morning as they took the train for that place. They were strictly on schedule, and Joe was eager, for more reasons than one, to reach the city where he hoped a certain girl might be.

"If we win, and Clevefield loses to-morrow,"

spoke Charlie Hall, as he dropped into a seat beside Joe, "we'll be on top of the heap."

"Yes—if!" exclaimed the young pitcher. "But I'm going to do my best, Charlie!"

"The same here!"

It was raining when the team arrived in Newkirk, and the weather was matched by the glum faces of the players.

"No game to-morrow, very likely," said Charlie, in disappointed tones. "Unless they have rubber grounds here."

"No such luck," returned Joe.

As he walked with the others to the desk to register he saw, amid a pile of luggage, a certain peculiar valise. He knew it instantly.

"Reggie Varley's!" he exclaimed to himself. "There never was another bag like that. And it has his initials on it. Reggie Varley is here—at this hotel, and—and—she—must be here too, Let it rain!"

CHAPTER XIII

MABEL

JOE MATSON stood spell-bound for a second or so, staring at the valise which had such an interest for him in two ways. It meant the presence at the hotel of the girl who had awakened such a new feeling within him, and also it recalled the unpleasant occasion when he had been accused of rifling it.

"What's the matter, Matson?" asked Gus Harrison, the big centre fielder, who stood directly behind the young pitcher, waiting to register. "Have you forgotten your name?"

"No—oh, no!" exclaimed our hero, coming to himself with a start. "I—er—I was just thinking of something."

"I should imagine so," commented Harrison. "Get a move on. I want to go to my room and tog up. I've got a date with a friend."

As Joe turned away from the desk, after registering, he could not refrain from glancing at the odd valise. He half expected to see Reggie Varley standing beside it, but there was no sign of Mabel's brother.

"Quite a coincidence that she should be stopping at this hotel," thought Joe, for a quick glance at the names on the register, ahead of those of the ball team, had shown Joe that Miss Varley's was among them. "Quite a coincidence," Joe mused on. "I wonder if she came here because she knew this was where the team always stops? Oh, of course not. I'm getting looney, I reckon."

Then, as he looked at the valise again another thought came to him.

"I do wish there was some way of proving to young Varley that I didn't take the stuff out of it," reasoned Joe. "But I don't see how I can prove that I didn't. It's harder to prove a negative than it is a positive, they say. Maybe he has found his stuff by this time; I must ask him if I get a chance. And yet I don't like to bring it up again, especially as she's here. She doesn't know of it yet, that's evident, or she'd have said something. I mean Reggie hasn't told her that he once suspected me."

Joe went to his room, and made a much more careful toilet than usual. So much so that Charlie Hall inquired rather sarcastically:

"Who's the lady, Joe?"

"Lady? What do you mean?" responded Joe, with simulated innocence.

"Oh, come now, that's too thin!" laughed the

shortstop. "Why all this gorgeousness? And a new tie! Upon my word! You are going it!"

"Oh, cut it out!" growled Joe, a bit incensed.

But, all the while, he was wondering how and when he would meet Mabel. Would it be proper for him to send her his card? Or would she know that the ball team had arrived, and send word to Joe that he could see her? How were such things managed anyhow?

Joe wished there was some one whom he could ask, but he shrank from taking into his confidence any of the members of the team.

"I'll just wait and see what turns up," he said.

Fate was kind to him, however.

Most of the ball players had gone in to dinner, discussing, meanwhile, the weather probabilities. There was a dreary drizzle outside, and the prospects for a fair day to follow were remote indeed. It meant almost certainly that there would be no game, and this was a disappointment to all. The Pittston team was on edge for the contest, for they wanted their chance to get to the top of the league.

"Well, maybe it's just as well," confided Gregory to Jimmie Mack. "It'll give the boys a chance to rest up, and they've been going the pace pretty hard lately. I do hope we win, though."

"Same here," exclaimed Jimmie earnestly.

As Joe came down from his apartment, and

crossed the foyer into the dining room, he turned around a pillar and came face to face with Reggie Varley—and his sister.

They both started at the sight of the young pitcher, and Mabel blushed. Joe did the same, for that matter.

"Oh, why how do you do!" the girl exclaimed graciously, holding out her hand. "I'm awfully glad to see you again! So you are here with your team? Oh, I do hope you'll win! Too bad it's raining; isn't it? Reggie, you must take me to the game! You remember Mr. Matson, of course!"

She spoke rapidly, as though to cover some embarrassment, and, for a few seconds, Joe had no chance to say anything, save incoherent murmurs, which, possibly, was proper under the circumstances.

"Oh, yes, I remember him," said Reggie, but there was not much cordiality in his tone or manner. "Certainly I remember him. Glad to meet you again, old man. We haven't forgotten what you did for sis. Awfully good of you."

Joe rather resented this tone, but perhaps Reggie could not help it. And the young pitcher wondered whether there was any significance in the way Reggie "remembered."

Young Varley glanced over toward where his odd valise had been placed, in a sort of checking room.

"Excuse me," he said to his sister and Joe. "I must have my luggage sent up. I quite forgot about it."

"Then there isn't any jewelry in it this time," spoke Joe significantly, and under the impulse of the moment. A second later he regretted it.

"No, of course not. Oh, I see!" exclaimed Reggie, and his face turned red. "I'll be back in a moment," he added as he hurried off.

Mabel glanced from her brother to Joe. She saw that there was something between them of which she knew nothing, but she had the tact to ignore it—at least for the present.

"Have you dined?" she asked Joe. "If you haven't there's a vacant seat at our table, and I'm sure Reggie and I would be glad to have you sit with us."

"I don't know whether he would or not," said Joe, feeling that, as his part in the story of the valise and the missing jewelry would have to come out sometime, now was as good as any.

"Why—what do you mean?" asked Mabel in surprise.

"Hasn't he told you?" demanded Joe.

"Told me? Told me what? I don't understand."

"I mean about his watch and some of your jewelry being taken."

"Oh, yes, some time ago. You mean when he

was up North. Wasn't it too bad! And my lovely beads were in his valise. But how did you know of it?"

"Because," blurted out Joe, "your brother accused me of taking them!"

Mabel started back.

"No!" she cried. "Never! He couldn't have done that!"

"But he did, and I'd give a lot to be able to prove that I had no hand in the looting!" Joe spoke, half jokingly.

"How silly!" exclaimed the girl. "The idea! How did it happen?"

Joe explained briefly, amid rather excited ejaculations from Mabel, and had just concluded when Reggie came back. He caught enough of the conversation to understand what it was about, and as his sister looked oddly at him, he exclaimed:

"Oh, I say now, Matson! I was hoping that wouldn't get out. I suppose I made rather a fool of myself—talking to you the way I did, but——"

"Well, I resented it somewhat at the time," replied Joe, slowly, "but I know how you must have felt."

"Yes. Well, I never have had a trace of the stuff. I was hoping sis, here, wouldn't know how I accused you—especially after the plucky way you saved her."

"I thought it best to tell," said the young pitcher, quietly.

"Oh, well, as you like," and Reggie shrugged his shoulders. "It was certainly a queer go."

"And I'm living in hope," went on Joe, "that some day I'll be able to prove that I had no hand in the matter."

"Oh, of course you didn't!" cried Mabel, impulsively. "It's silly of you, Reggie, to think such a thing."

"I don't think it—now!"

But in spite of this denial Joe could not help feeling that perhaps, after all, Reggie Varley still had an undefined suspicion against him.

"I say!" exclaimed Joe's one-time accuser, "won't you dine with us? We have a nice waiter at our table——"

"I had already asked him," broke in Mabel.

"Then that's all right. I say, Matson, can't you take my sister in? I've just had a 'phone message about some of dad's business that brought me up here. I've got to go see a man, and if you'll take Mabel in——"

"I shall be delighted."

"How long will you be, Reggie?"

"Oh, not long, Sis. But if I see Jenkinson to-night it will save us time to-morrow."

"Oh, all right. But if I let you off now you'll have to take me to the ball game to-morrow."

"I will—if it doesn't rain."

"And you'll be back in time for the theatre?"

"Surely. I'll run along now. It's awfully good of you, Matson, to take——"

"Not at all!" interrupted Joe. The pleasure was all his, he felt.

He and Mabel went into the hotel dining room, and Joe's team-mates glanced curiously at him from where they sat. But none of them made any remarks.

"It was dreadful of Reggie, to accuse you that way," the girl murmured, when they were seated.

"Oh, he was flustered, and perhaps it was natural," said Joe. "I did sit near the valise, you know."

"I know—but——"

They talked over the matter at some length, and then the conversation drifted to baseball. Joe had never eaten such a delightful meal, though if you had asked him afterward what the menu was made up of, he could not have told you. It was mostly Mabel, I think, from the soup to the dessert.

CHAPTER XIV

BAD NEWS

GROUNDS that were soggy and wet, and a dreary drizzle of rain, prevented a game next day, and there was much disappointment. Weather reports were eagerly scanned, and the skies looked at more than once.

"I think it'll clear to-morrow," remarked Joe to Charlie Hall.

"I sure hope so. I want to see what sort of meat these Newkirk fellows are made of since we played against 'em last."

"Oh, they're husky enough, as we found, Charlie," for there had been several league games between this team and the Pittston nine, but in the latter town. Now the tables might be turned.

"They've got some new players," went on Charlie, "and a pitcher who's said to be a marvel."

"Well, you've got me," laughed Joe, in simulated pride.

"That's right, old man, and I'm glad of it. I

think you're going to pull us to the top in this pennant race."

"Oh, I haven't such a swelled head as to think that," spoke Joe, "but I'm going to work hard—I guess we all are. But what does it look like for Clevefield to-day? You know she's got to lose and we've got to win to put us on top."

"I know. There wasn't any report of rain there, so the game must be going on. We ought to get results soon. Come on over to the ticker."

It was after luncheon, and the game in Clevefield, with the Washburg nine, would soon start. Then telegraphic reports of the contest that, in a way, meant so much for Pittston would begin coming in.

After the delightful dinner Joe had had with Mabel his pleasure was further added to when he went with her to the theatre. Reggie telephoned that he could not get back in time, and asked Joe to take his sister, she having the tickets.

Of course the young pitcher was delighted, but he could not get over the uneasy feeling that young Varley was suspicious of him.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Joe, mentally. "I've just got to get that out of his mind! But how? Only by finding his watch or Mabel's jewelry, and I suppose I might as well look for a needle in a haystack."

Joe sat in the hotel corridor, looking over a

newspaper, and waiting for some news of the Clevefield game, as many of his team were doing. An item caught the eye of the young pitcher that caused him to start. It was to the effect that the unfortunate Pop Dutton had been arrested for creating a scene at a ball park.

"Poor old man!" mused Joe. "I wish I could do something for him. I feel sort of responsible for him, since I saved his life. I wonder if he couldn't be straightened up? I must have another talk with Gregory about him."

A yell from some of the players gathered about the news ticker in the smoking room brought Joe to his feet.

"What is it?" he called to Charlie Hall.

"Washburg got three runs the first inning and Clevefield none!" was the answer. "It looks as if Washburg would have a walk-over. And you know what that means for us."

"Yes, if we win to-morrow."

"Win! Of course we'll win, you old bone-head!" cried Charlie, clapping Joe affectionately on the back.

Further news from the game was eagerly awaited and when the last inning had been ticked off, and Washburg had won by a margin of three runs, the Pittston team was delighted.

Not at the downfall of fellow players, under-

stand, but because it gave Pittston the coveted chance to be at the top of the first division.

"Boys, we've just got to win that game to-morrow!" cried Gregory.

"If they don't I'll make them live on bread and water for a week!" cried Trainer McGuire, with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

The second day following proved all that could be desired from a weather standpoint for a ball game, the grounds having dried up meanwhile. It was bright and sunny, but not too warm, and soon after breakfast the team was ordered out on the field for light practice.

This was necessary as their day of comparative idleness, added to the damp character of the weather, had made them all a little stiff.

"Get limbered up, boys," advised Jimmie Mack. "You'll need all the speed and power you can bring along to-day. Joe, how's your arm?"

"All right, I guess," answered the young pitcher.

"Well, do some light practice. Come on. I'll catch for you a while."

There had been some slight changes made in the Newkirk grounds since last season, and Gregory wanted his players to familiarize themselves with the new layout. Joe was delighted with the diamond. Though Newkirk was a smaller city

than Pittston the ball field was kept in better shape.

"Of course it isn't the Polo Grounds," Joe confided to Charlie Hall, "but they're pretty good."

"I wonder if I'll ever get a chance to play on the Polo Grounds?" murmured Charlie, half enviously. "It must be great!"

"It is!" cried Joe, with memories of the Yale-Princeton contest he had taken part in there. "And I'm going to do it again, some time!"

"You are?"

"I sure am. I'm going to break into a big league if it's possible."

"Good for you, Joe!"

"Still, the grounds aren't everything, Charlie," went on Joe. "We've got to play the best ball to win the game."

"And we'll do it, too! Don't worry."

The practice was worked up to a fast and snappy point, and then Gregory sent his men for a brisk walk, to be followed by a shower bath in preparation for the afternoon contest.

Certainly when the Pittston team started for the grounds again they were a bright, clean-looking lot of players. Joe was wondering whether he would have a chance to pitch, but, following his usual policy, the crafty manager did not announce his battery until the last moment.

There was a big crowd out to see the game, for the rivalry in the Central League was now intense, and interest was well keyed up. Joe had seen Mabel and her brother start for the grounds, and he wished, more than ever before, perhaps, that he would be sent to the mound to do battle for his team.

The Newkirk men were out on the diamond when the Pittston players arrived, and, after an interval the latter team was given a chance to warm up. Joe and the other pitchers began their usual practice, and Joe felt that he could do himself justice if he could but get a chance.

There was silence as the batteries were announced, and Joe could not help feeling a keen disappointment as Tooley, the south-paw, was named to open the contest.

"There's a lot of queer batters on the Newkirks," Joe heard Bob Newton, the right fielder, say to Terry Hanson, who played left. "I guess that's the reason the old man wants Tooley to feel them out."

"I reckon."

"Play ball!" droned the umpire as the gong clanged, and George Lee, the second baseman, who was first at bat, strolled out to pick up his club.

The first part of the game was rather a surprise to the Pittston players. Lee was struck out

with amazing ease, and even Jimmie Mack, who had the best batting average of any on the team, "fell" for a delusive "fade-away" ball.

"But I've got his number!" he exclaimed, as he nodded at the opposing pitcher. "He won't get me again."

Pittston did not get a run, though she had three men on bases when the last one went down, and it looked as though her chances were good.

Then came more disappointment when Tooley failed to get his batters, and Newkirk had two runs chalked up to her credit. The second inning was almost like the first and then at the proper time, Gregory, with a decisive gesture, signalled to Joe.

"You'll have to pitch us out of this hole!" he said, grimly. Collin, who had said openly that he expected to be called on, looked blackly at our hero.

As Joe started to take his place a messenger boy handed him a telegram. He was a little startled at first, and then laughed at his fears.

"Probably good wishes from home," he murmured, as he tore open the envelope. And then the bright day seemed to go black as he read:

"Your father hurt in explosion. No danger of death, but may lose eyesight. If you can come home do so. MOTHER."

CHAPTER XV

JOE'S PLUCK

JOE'S distress at receiving the bad news was so evident, at least to Gregory, that the manager hurried over to the young pitcher and asked:

"What's the matter, old man? Something upset you?"

For answer Joe simply held out the message.

"I say! That's too bad!" exclaimed Gregory sympathetically. "Let's see now. You can get a train in about an hour, I think. Skip right off. I'll make it all right." It was his business to know much about trains, and he was almost a "walking timetable."

"Awfully sorry, old man!" he went on. "Come back to us when you can. You'll find us waiting."

Joe made up his mind quickly. It was characteristic of him to do this, and it was one of the traits that made him, in after years, such a phenomenal pitcher.

"I—I'm not going home," said Joe, quietly.

"Not going home! Why?" cried Gregory.

"At least not until after the game," went on Joe. "The telegram says my father isn't in any immediate danger, and I could not gain much by starting now. I'm going to stay and pitch. That is, if you'll let me."

"Let you! Of course I'll let you. But can you stand the gaff, old man? I don't want to seem heartless, but the winning of this game means a lot to me, and if you don't feel just up to the mark——"

"Oh, I can pitch—at least, I think I can," said Joe, not wishing to appear too egotistical. "I mean this won't make me flunk."

"That's mighty plucky of you, Joe, and I appreciate it. Now don't make a mistake. It won't hurt your standing with the club a bit if you go now. I'll put Collin in, and——"

"I'll pitch!" said Joe, determinedly. "After that it will be time enough to start for home."

"All right," assented Gregory. "But if you want to quit at any time, give me the signal. And I'll tell you what I'll do. Have you a telephone at home?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll have someone get your house on the long distance wire, and find out just how your father is. I'll also send word that you'll start tonight."

"That will be fine!" cried Joe, and already he felt better. The bad news had shocked him for the time, though.

"Play ball!" called the umpire, for there had been a little delay over the talk between Joe and the manager.

"Just keep quiet about it, though," advised the manager to the young pitcher. "It may only upset things if it gets out. Are you sure you can stand it?"

"I—I'm going to stand it!" responded Joe, gamely.

He faced his first batter with a little sense of uncertainty. But Nelson, who was catching, nodded cheerfully at him, and gave a signal for a certain ball that Joe, himself, had decided would best deceive that man with the stick. He sent it in rushingly, and was delighted to hear the umpire call:

"Strike one!"

"That's the way!"

"Two more like that and he's a goner!"

"[illegible] 'em in, Matson!"

Joe flushed with pleasure at the encouraging words. He wondered if Mabel was joining in the applause that frequently swept over the grandstand at a brilliant play.

Again Joe threw, and all the batter could do was to hit a foul, which was not caught.

Then came a ball, followed by another, and Joe began to get a bit anxious.

"That's the boy!" welled up encouragingly from the crowd.

Joe tried a moist ball—a delivery of which he was not very certain as yet, but the batter "fell for it" and whirled around as he missed it cleanly.

"Three strikes—batter's out!" howled the umpire, and the man went back to the bench.

The next candidate managed to get a single, but was caught stealing second, and Joe had a chance to retire his third man.

It was a chance not to be missed, and he indulged in a few delaying tactics in order to place, in his mind, the hitter and his special peculiarities.

With a snap of his wrist Joe sent in an out curve, but the manner in which the batter leaped for it, missing it only by a narrow margin, told our hero that this ball was just "pie," for his antagonist.

"Mustn't do that again," thought Joe. "He'll slam it over the fence if I do."

The next—an in-shoot—was hit, but only for a foul, and Joe, whose heart had gone into his throat as he heard the crack of the bat, breathed easier. Then, just to puzzle the batter, after delivering a "moistener" that fell off and was called a ball, Joe sent in a "teaser"—a slow one—that fooled the player, who flied out to shortstop.

Joe was beginning to feel more confidence in himself.

The others of the Pittston team grinned encouragingly at Joe, and Gregory clasped his arms about the young pitcher as he came in to the bench.

"Can you stick it out?" he asked.

"Sure! Have you any word yet on the 'phone?"

"No. Not yet. I'm expecting Hastings back any minute," naming a substitute player who had not gone into the game, and whom the manager had sent to call up Joe's house. "But are you sure you want to keep on playing?"

"Sure," answered Joe. He had a glimpse of Collin, and fancied that the eager look on the other pitcher's face turned to one of disappointment.

"You're beating me out," said Tooley, the south-paw, with an easy laugh.

"I'm sorry," said Joe, for he knew how it felt to be supplanted.

"Oh, I'm not worrying. My turn will come again. One can't be up to the mark all the while."

Pittston managed to get a run over the plate that inning, and when it came time for Joe to go to the mound again he had better news to cheer him up.

Word had come over the telephone that Mr. Matson, while making some tests at the Harvester Works, had been injured by an explosion of acids.

Some had gone into his face, burning him badly.

His life was in no danger, but his eyesight might be much impaired, if not lost altogether. Nothing could be told in this respect for a day or so.

Hastings had been talking to Joe's sister Clara, to whom he explained that Joe would start for home as soon as the game was over. Mrs. Matson was bearing up well under the strain, the message said, and Joe was told not to worry.

"Now I'll be able to do better," said the young pitcher, with a little smile. "Thanks for the good news."

"You're doing all right, boy!" cried Gregory. "I think we're going to win!"

But it was not to be as easy as saying it. The Newkirk men fought hard, and to the last inch. They had an excellent pitcher—a veteran—who was well backed up with a fielding force, and every run the Pittstons got they fully earned.

Joe warmed up to his work, and to the howling delight of the crowd struck out two men in succession, after one had gone out on a pop fly, while there were two on bases. That was a test of nerve, for something might have broken loose at any moment.

But Joe held himself well in hand, and watched his batters. He so varied his delivery that he puzzled them, and working in unison with Nelson very little got past them.

Then came a little spurt on the part of Newkirk, and they "sweetened" their score until there was a tie. It was in the ninth inning, necessitating another to decide the matter.

"If we can get one run we'll have a chance to win," declared Gregory. "That is, if you can hold them in the last half of the tenth, Joe."

"I'll do my best!"

"I know you will, my boy!"

For a time it looked as though it could not be done. Two of the Pittston players went down in rapid succession before the magnificent throwing of the Newkirk pitcher. Then he made a fatal mistake. He "fed" a slow ball to John Holme, the big third baseman, who met it squarely with his stick, and when the shouting was over John was safely on the third sack.

"Now bring him home, Joe!" cried the crowd, as the young pitcher stepped to the plate. It was not the easiest thing in the world to stand up there and face a rival pitcher, with the knowledge that your hit might win the game by bringing in the man on third. And especially after the advent of the telegram. But Joe steadied himself, and smiled at his opponent.

He let the first ball go, and a strike was called on him. There was a groan from grandstand and bleachers.

"Take your time, Joe!" called Gregory, soothingly. "Get what you want."

It came. The ball sailed for the plate at the right height, and Joe correctly gaged it. His bat met it squarely, with a resounding "plunk!"

"That's the boy!"

"Oh, what a beaut!"

"Take third on that!"

"Come on home, you ice wagon!"

"Run! Run! Run!"

It was a wildly shrieking mob that leaped to its feet, cheering on Joe and Holme. On and on ran the young pitcher. He had a confused vision of the centre fielder running back to get the ball which had dropped well behind him. Joe also saw Holme racing in from third. He could hear the yells of the crowd and fancied—though of course it could not be so—that he could hear the voice of Mabel calling to him.

On and on ran Joe, and stopped, safe on second, Holme had gone in with the winning run.

But that was all. The next man struck out, and Joe was left on the "half-way station."

"But we're one ahead, and if we can hold the lead we've got 'em!" cried Gregory. "Joe, my boy, it's up to you! Can you hold 'em down?"

He looked earnestly at the young pitcher.

"I—I'll do it!" cried Joe.

CHAPTER XVI

A SLIM CHANCE

THERE was an almost breathless silence as Joe walked to the mound to begin what he hoped would be the ending of the final inning of the game. If he could prevent, with the aid of his mates, the Newkirk team from gaining a run, the Pittstons would be at the top of the list. If not——

But Joe did not like to think about that. He was under a great nervous strain, not only because of the news concerning his father, but because of what his failure or success might mean to the club he had the honor to represent.

"I've just got to win!" said Joe to himself.

"Play ball!" called the umpire.

Joe had been holding himself a little in reserve up to now; that is, he had not used the last ounce of ability that he had, for he could see that the game was going to be a hard one, and that a little added "punch" at the last moment might make or break for victory.

The young pitcher had a good delivery of what is known as the "jump" ball. It is sent in with

all the force possible, and fairly jumps as it approaches the plate. It is often used to drive the batsman away from the rubber. It is supposed to go straight for the plate, or the inside corner, and about shoulder high. A long preliminary swing is needed for this ball, and it is pitched with an overhand delivery.

Joe had practiced this until he was a fair master of it, but he realized that it was exhausting. Always after sending in a number of these his arm would be lame, and he was not good for much the next day. But now he thought the time had come to use it, varying it, of course, with other styles of delivery.

"I've got to hold 'em down!" thought Joe.

He realized that the attention of all was on him, and he wished he could catch the eyes of a certain girl he knew sat in the grandstand watching him. Joe also felt that Collin, his rival, was watching him narrowly, and he could imagine the veteran pitcher muttering:

"Why do they send in a young cub like that when so much depends on it? Why didn't Gregory call me?"

But the manager evidently knew what he was doing.

"Play ball!" called the umpire again, at the conclusion of the sending in of a practice ball or two.

Joe caught his breath sharply.

"It's now or never!" he thought as he grasped the ball in readiness for the jump. "It's going to strain me, but if I go home for a day or so I can rest up."

In went the horsehide sphere with great force. It accomplished just what Joe hoped it would. The batter instinctively stepped back, but there was no need. The ball neatly clipped the corner of the plate, and the umpire called:

"Strike one!"

Instantly there was a howl from the crowd.

"That's the way!"

"Two more, Matson, old man!"

"Make him stand up!"

"Slam it out, Johnson!"

The batter had his friends as well as Joe.

But the battle was not half won yet. There were two men to be taken care of after this one was disposed of, and he still had his chances.

Joe signalled to his catcher that he would slip in a "teaser" now, and the man in the wire mask nodded his understanding. The batter smiled, in anticipation of having a "ball" called on him, but was amazed, not to say angry, when he heard from the umpire the drawling:

"Strike—two!"

Instantly there came a storm of protest, some from the crowd, a half-uttered sneer from the bat-

ter himself, but more from his manager and teammates on the players' bench.

"Forget it!" sharply cried the umpire, supreme master that he was. "I said 'strike,' and a strike it goes. Play ball!"

Joe was delighted. It showed that they were now to have fair treatment from the deciding power, though during the first part of the game the umpire's decisions had not been altogether fair to Pittston.

The crowd was breathlessly eager again, as Joe wound up once more. Then there was a mad yell as the batter hit the next ball.

"Go on! Go on! You——"

"Foul!" yelled the umpire, and there was a groan of disappointment.

Joe was a little nervous, so it is no wonder that he was called for a ball on his next delivery. But following that he sent in as neat an out curve as could be desired. The batter missed it by a foot, and throwing his stick down in disgust walked to the bench.

"Only two more, old man!" called Gregory encouragingly. "Only two more. We've got their number."

Then came an attempt on the part of the crowd, which naturally was mostly in sympathy with their home team, to get Joe's "goat." He was hooted at and reviled. He was advised to go back to col-

lege, and to let a man take his place. Joe only grinned and made no answer. The nervous strain under which he was playing increased. He wanted, no one perhaps but Gregory knew how much, to get away and take a train for home, to be with his suffering father.

But there were two more men to put out. And Joe did it.

That is, he struck out the next man. The third one singled, and when the best batter of the opposing team came up, Joe faced him confidently.

After two balls had been called, and the crowd was at the fever point of expectancy, Joe got a clean strike. It was followed by a foul, and then came a little pop fly that was easily caught by the young pitcher, who hardly had to move from his mound.

"Pittston wins!"

"Pittston is up head!"

"Three cheers for Joe Matson!"

They were given with a will, too, for the crowd loved a plucky player, even if it was on the other side.

But Joe did not stay to hear this. He wanted to catch the first train for home, and hurried into the dressing room. He spoke to Gregory, saying that he was going, and would be back as soon as he could.

"Take your time, old man; take your time,"

said the manager kindly. "You did a lot for us to-day, and now I guess we can hold our own until you come back."

There were sympathetic inquiries from Joe's fellow players when they heard what had happened. Joe wanted to say good-bye to Mabel, but did not quite see how he could do it. He could hardly find her in that crowd.

But chance favored him, and as he was entering the hotel to get his grip, he met her.

"Oh, it was splendid!" she cried with girlish enthusiasm, holding out her slim, pretty hand. "It was fine! However did you do it?"

"I guess because I knew you were watching me!" exclaimed Joe with a boldness that he himself wondered at later.

"Oh, that's awfully nice of you to say," she answered, with a blush. "I wish I could believe it!"

"You can!" said Joe, still more boldly.

"But you—you look as though something had happened," she went on, for surely Joe's face told that.

"There has," he said, quietly, and he told of the accident to his father.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, clasping his hand again. "And you pitched after you heard the news! How brave of you! Is there anything

we can do—my brother—or I?" she asked anxiously.

"Thank you, no," responded Joe, in a low voice. "I am hoping it will not be serious."

"You must let me know—let Reggie know," she went on. "We shall be here for some days yet."

Joe promised to write, and then hurried off to catch his train. It was a long ride to Riverside, and to Joe, who was all impatience to be there, the train seemed to be the very slowest kind of a freight, though it really was an express.

But all things must have an end, and that torturing journey did. Joe arrived in his home town late one afternoon, and took a carriage to the house. He saw Clara at the window, and could see that she had been crying. She slipped to the door quickly, and held up a warning finger.

"What—what's the matter?" asked Joe in a hoarse whisper. "Is—is he worse?"

"No, he's a little better, if anything. But he has just fallen asleep, and so has mother. She is quite worn out. Come in and I'll tell you about it. Oh, Joe! I'm so glad you're home!"

Clara related briefly the particulars of the accident, and then the doctor came in. By this time Mrs. Matson had awakened and welcomed her son.

"What chance is there, Doctor," asked the

young pitcher; "what chance to save his eyesight?"

"Well, there's a chance; but, I'm sorry to say, it is only a slim one," was the answer. "It's too soon to say with certainty, however. Another day will have to pass. I hope all will be well, but now all I can say is that there is a chance."

Joe felt his heart beating hard, and then, bracing himself to meet the emergency if it should come, he put his arm around his weeping mother, and said, as cheerfully as he could:

"Well, I believe chance is going to be on our side. I'm going to use a bit of baseball slang, and say I have a 'hunch' that we'll win out!"

"That's the way to talk!" cried Dr. Birch, heartily.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD POP AGAIN

Dr. Birch remained for some little time at the Matson home, going over in detail with Joe just what the nature of his father's injuries were. In brief, while experimenting on a certain new method of chilling steel, for use in a corn sheller, Mr. Matson mixed some acids together.

Unknown to him a workman had, accidentally, substituted one very strong acid for a weak one. When the mixture was put into an iron pot there was an explosion. Some of the acid, and splinters of iron, flew up into the face of the inventor.

"And until I can tell whether the acid, or a piece of steel, injured his eyes, Joe, I can't say for sure what we shall have to do," concluded the doctor.

"You mean about an operation?"

"Yes. If we have to perform one it will be a very delicate one, and it will cost a lot of money; there are only a few men in this country capable of doing it, and their fees, naturally, are high. But we won't think of that now. I think I will go

in and see how he is. If he is well enough I want you to see him. It will do him good."

"And me, too," added Joe, who was under a great strain, though he did not show it.

Mr. Matson was feeling better after his rest, and Joe was allowed to come into the darkened room. He braced himself for the ordeal.

"How are you, Son," said the inventor weakly.

"Fine, Dad. But I'm sorry to see you laid up this way."

"Well, Joe, it couldn't be helped. I should have been more careful. But I guess I'll pull through. How is baseball?"

"Couldn't be better, Dad! We're at the top of the heap! I just helped to win the deciding game before I came on."

"Yes, I heard your mother talking about the telephone message. I'm glad you didn't come away without playing. Have you the pennant yet?"

"Oh, no. That won't be decided for a couple of months. But we're going to win it!"

"That's what I like to hear!"

Dr. Birch did not permit his patient to talk long, and soon Joe had to leave the room. The physician said later that he thought there was a slight improvement in Mr. Matson's condition, though of course the matter of saving his eyesight could not yet be decided.

"But if we do have to have an operation," said Mrs. Matson. "I don't see where the money is coming from. Your father's investments are turning out so badly——"

"Don't worry about that, Mother," broke in Joe.

"But I have to, Joe. If an operation is needed we'll have to get the money. And from where is more than I know," she added, hopelessly.

"I'll get the money!" exclaimed the young pitcher in energetic tones.

"How?" asked his mother. "I'm sure you can't make enough at ball playing."

"No, perhaps not at ordinary ball playing, Mother, but at the end of the season, when the deciding games for the pennant are played off, they always draw big crowds, and the players on the winning team come in for a good share of the receipts. I'll use mine for the operation."

"But your team may not win the pennant, Joe," said Clara.

"We're going to win!" cried the young pitcher. "I feel it in my bones! Don't worry, Mother."

But, naturally, Mrs. Matson could not help it, in spite of Joe's brave words. Clara, though, was cheered up.

"There's more to baseball than I thought," she said.

"There's more in it than I'll ever learn," ad-

mitted Joe, frankly. "Of course our pennant-deciding games aren't like the world series, but I understand they bring in a lot of money."

Mr. Matson was quite improved the next day, but Dr. Birch, and another physician, who was called in consultation, could not settle the matter about the eyes.

"It will be fully a month before we can decide about the operation," said the expert. "In the meanwhile he is in no danger, and the delay will give him a chance to get back his strength. We shall have to wait."

As nothing could be gained by Joe's staying home, and as his baseball money was very much needed at this trying time, it was decided that he had better rejoin his team.

He bade his parents and sister good-bye, and arranged to have word sent to him every day as to his father's condition.

"And don't you worry about that money, Mother," he said as he kissed her. "I'll be here with it when it's needed."

"Oh, Joe!" was all she said, but she looked happier.

Joe went back to join the team at Delamont, where they were scheduled to play four games, and then they would return to their home town of Pittston.

From the newspapers Joe learned that his team

had taken three of the four contests in Newkirk, and might have had the fourth but for bad pitching on the part of Collin.

"Maybe he won't be so bitter against me now," thought Joe. "He isn't such a wonder himself."

Joe was glancing over the paper as the train sped on toward Delamont. He was looking over other baseball news, and at the scores of the big leagues.

"I wonder when I'll break into them?" mused Joe, as he glanced rather enviously at several large pictures of celebrated players in action. "I'm going to do it as soon as I can."

Then the thought came to him of how hard it was for a young and promising player to get away from the club that controlled him.

"The only way would be to slump in form," said Joe to himself, "and then even if he did get his release no other team would want him. It's a queer game, and not altogether fair, but I suppose it has to be played that way. Well, no use worrying about the big leagues until I get a call from one. There'll be time enough then to wonder about my release."

As Joe was about to lay aside the paper he was aware of a controversy going on a few seats ahead of him. The conductor had stopped beside an elderly man and was saying:

"You'll have to get off, that's all there is to it. You deliberately rode past your station, and you're only trying to see how far you can go without being caught. You get off at the next station, or if you don't I'll stop the train when I get to you and put you off, even if it's in the middle of a trestle. You're trying to beat your way, and you know it! You had a ticket only to Clearville, and you didn't get off."

"Oh, can't you pass me on to Delamont?" pleaded the man. "I admit I was trying to beat you. But I've got to get to Delamont. I've the promise of work there, and God knows I need it. I'll pay the company back when I earn it."

"Huh!" sneered the conductor, "that's too thin. I've heard that yarn before. No, sir; you get off at the next station, or I'll have the brakeman run you off. Understand that! No more monkey business. Either you give me money or a ticket, or off you go."

"All right," was the short answer. "I reckon I'll have to do it."

The man turned and at the sight of his face Joe started.

"Pop Dutton!" exclaimed the young pitcher, hardly aware that he had spoken aloud.

"That's me," was the answer. "Oh—why—it's Joe!" he added, and his face lighted up. Then a look of despair came over it. Joe decided quick-

ly. No matter what Gregory and the others said he had determined to help this broken-down old ball player.

"What's the fare to Delamont?" Joe asked the conductor.

"One-fifty, from the last station."

"I'll pay it," went on Joe, handing over a bill. The ticket-puncher looked at him curiously, and then, without a word, made the change, and gave Joe the little excess slip which was good for ten cents, to be collected at any ticket office.

"Say, Joe Matson, that's mighty good of you!" exclaimed Old Pop Dutton, as Joe came to sit beside him. "Mighty good!"

"That's all right," spoke Joe easily. "What are you going to do in Delamont?"

"I've got a chance to be assistant ground-keeper at the ball park. I—I'm trying to—trying to get back to a decent life, Joe, but—but it's hard work."

"Then I'm going to help you!" exclaimed the young pitcher, impulsively. "I'm going to ask Gregory if he can't give you something to do. Do you think you could play ball again?"

"I don't know, Joe," was the doubtful answer. "They say when they get—get like me—that they can't come back. I couldn't pitch, that's sure. I've got something the matter with my arm. Doctor said a slight operation would cure me, and

I might be better than ever, but I haven't any money for operations. But I could be a fair fielder, I think, and maybe I could fatten up my batting average."

"Would you like to try?" asked Joe.

"Would I?" The man's tone was answer enough.

"Then I'm going to get you the chance," declared Joe. "But you'll have to take care of yourself, and—get in better shape."

"I know it, Joe. I'm ashamed of myself—that's what I am. I've gone pretty far down, but I believe I can come back. I've quit drinking, and I've cut my old acquaintances."

Joe looked carefully at Pop Dutton. The marks of the life he had led of late were to be seen in his trembling hands, and in his blood-shot eyes. But there was a fine frame and a good physique to build on. Joe had great hopes.

"You come on to Delamont with me," said the young pitcher, "and I'll look after you until you get straightened out. Then we'll see what the doctor says, and Gregory, too. I believe he'll give you the chance."

"Joe! I don't know how to thank you!" said the man earnestly. "If I can ever do something for you—but I don't believe I ever can."

Pop Dutton little realized how soon the time was to come when he could do Joe a great favor.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN DESPAIR

Joe and Pop Dutton arrived at the hotel in Delamont ahead of the team, which was on the way from Newkirk after losing the last game of the four. But at that Pittston was still in the lead, and now all energies would be bent on increasing the percentage so that even the loss of a game now and then would not pull the club from its place.

"Now look here, Joe," said Pop, when he and Joe had eaten, "this may be all right for me, but it isn't going to do you any good."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean consorting with me in this way. I can't stay at this hotel with you, the other players would guy you too much."

"I don't care about that."

"Well, but I do. Now, look here. I appreciate a whole lot what you're doing for me, but it would be better if I could go to some other hotel. Then, if you can, you get Gregory to give me a chance. I'll work at anything—assistant trainer, or anything—to get in shape again. But it would

be better for me not to stay here where the team puts up.

"If things go right, and I can go back to Pittston with the boys, I'll go to some quiet boarding house. Being at a hotel isn't any too good for me. It brings back old times."

Joe saw the logic of Pop's talk, and consented. He gave the broken-down player enough money to enable him to live quietly for several days. When the team came Joe determined to put the question to the manager.

As Joe had registered he looked over the book to see if he knew any of the guests at the hotel. Though he did not admit so to himself he had half a forlorn hope that he might find the name of Mabel and her brother there. He even looked sharply at the various pieces of luggage as they were carried in by the bell boys, but he did not see the curious valise that had played such an unpleasant part in his life.

Joe was feeling very "fit." The little rest, even though it was broken by anxiety concerning his father, had done him good, and the arm that had been strained in the game that meant so much to Pittston was in fine shape again. Joe felt able to pitch his very best.

"And I guess we'll have to do our prettiest if we want to keep at the top of the heap," he reasoned.

Then the team arrived, and noisily and enthusiastically welcomed Joe to their midst again.

Seeking the first opportunity, Joe had a talk with the manager concerning Pop Dutton. At first Gregory would not listen, and tried to dissuade Joe from having anything to do with the old player. But the young pitcher had determined to go on with his rescue work, and pleaded with such good effect that finally the manager said:

"Well, I'll give him a chance, providing he shows that he can keep straight. I don't believe he can, but, for your sake, I'm willing to make the experiment. I've done it before, and been taken in every time. I'm sure this will only be another, but you might as well learn your lesson now as later."

"I don't believe I'll have much to learn," answered Joe with a smile. "I think Pop can come back."

"The players who can do that are as scarce as hens' teeth," was the rejoinder of the manager. "But I'll take this last chance. Of course he can't begin to play right off the bat. He's got to get in training. By the way, I suppose he has his release?" The manager looked questioningly at Joe.

"Oh, yes. He's free and clear to make any contract he likes. He told me that."

"I imagined so. No one wants him. I'm afraid I'm foolish for taking him on, but I'll do

it to please you. I'll take his option, and pay him a small sum."

"Then I'll do the rest," returned Joe, eagerly. "I'm going to have his arm looked at, and then couldn't you get him a place where he could do out-door work—say help keep our grounds in shape?"

"Well, I'll think about it, Joe. But about yourself? Are you ready to sail in again?"

"I sure am. What are the prospects?"

"Well, they might be better. Collin isn't doing any too well. I'm thinking of buying another pitcher to use when there's not much at stake. Gus Harrison is laid up—sprained his knee a little making a mean slide. I've got to do some shifting, and I need every game I can get from now on. But I guess we'll come out somehow."

But the team did not come out "somehow." It came out "nohow," for it lost its first game with Delamont the next day, and this, coupled with the winning of a double-header by Clevefield, put that team in the lead and sent Pittston to second place.

Joe worked hard, so hard that he began to go to pieces in the seventh inning, and had to be replaced by Tooley, who came into the breach wonderfully well, and, while he did not save the day, he prevented a disgraceful beating. Joe was in the dumps after this despite the cheerful, optimistic attitude of the manager.

Joe's one consolation, though, was that Pop Dutton was in the way of being provided for. The old pitcher was holding himself rigidly in line, and taking care of himself. He had a talk with Gregory—a shame-faced sort of talk on Pop's part—and was promised a place at the Pittston ball park. It was agreed that he would go into training, and try to get back to his old form.

Gregory did not believe this could be done, but if a miracle should happen he realized that he would own a valuable player—one that would be an asset to his club.

And then something happened. How it came about no one could say for a certainty, but Joe went "stale."

He fell off woefully in his pitching, and the loss of several games was attributable directly to his "slump."

Joe could not account for it, nor could his friends; but the fact remained. Pittston dropped to third place, and the papers which gave much space to the doings of the Central League began to make sarcastic remarks.

On the diamond, too, Joe had to suffer the gibes of the crowd, which is always ready to laud a successful player, and only too ready, also, to laugh at one who has a temporary setback.

Joe was in despair, but in his letters home he kept cheerful. He did not want his folks to worry.

Regularly he sent money to his mother, taking out of his salary check almost more than he could really afford. Also he felt the drain of looking after Pop, but now that the latter had regular work on the diamond, keeping it in order, the old pitcher was, in a measure, self-supporting.

Pop was rapidly becoming more like his former self, but it would take some time yet. He indulged in light practice, Joe often having him catch for him when no one else was available. As yet Pop attempted no pitching, the doctor to whom Joe took him warning him against it.

"There will have to be a slight operation on certain muscles," said the medical man, "but I prefer to wait a bit before doing it. You will be in better shape then."

"You're taking too much trouble about me, Joe," remarked the veteran player one day.

"Not a bit too much," responded Joe, heartily.

From Joe's father came slightly encouraging news. The need of an operation was not yet settled, and Mr. Matson's general health had improved.

"And we can bless baseball a lot!" wrote Mrs. Matson to her son. "I'm sorry I ever said anything against it, Joe. If it were not for the money you make at the game I don't know what we'd do now."

Joe was glad his mother saw matters in a differ-

ent light, but he was also a little disturbed. His pitching was not what it should be, and he felt, if his form fell off much more, that he would not last long, even in a small league.

Occasionally he did well—even brilliantly, and the team had hopes. Then would come a "slump," and they would lose a much-needed game that would have lifted them well toward front place.

Joe's despair grew, and he wondered what he could do to get back to his good form. Clevefield, the ancient rivals of Pittston, were now firmly entrenched in first place, and there remained only about a quarter of the league season yet to play.

"We've got to hustle if we want that pennant!" said Gregory, and his tone was not encouraging. Joe thought of what he had promised about having the money for his father's operation, and wondered whether he could do as he said.

But I must not give the impression that all was unhappiness and gloom in the Pittston team. True, the members felt badly about losing, but their nerve did not desert them, and they even joked grimly when the play went against them.

Then came a little diversion. They played a contest against a well-known amateur nine for charity, and the game was made the occasion for considerable jollity.

Gregory sent in most of his second string play-

ers against the amateurs, but kept Joe as a twirler, for he wanted him to see what he could do against some fairly good hitters.

And, to Joe's delight, he seemed more like his old self. He had better control of the ball, his curves "broke" well and he was a source of dismay to the strong amateurs. Of course Pittston, even with her substitutes in the game, fairly walked away from the others, the right-handed batters occasionally doing left stick-work, on purpose to strike out.

But the little change seemed to do them all good, and when the next regular contest came off Pittston won handily, Joe almost equalling his best record.

It was at a hotel in Buffington, whither they had gone to play a series of games with that team, that, one afternoon, as Joe entered his room, after the game, he surprised a colored bell boy hurriedly leaving it.

"Did you want me?" asked the young pitcher.

"No, sah, boss! 'Deed an' I didn't want yo'-all," stammered the dusky youth.

"Then what were you doing in my room?" asked Joe, suspiciously.

"I—I were jest seein', boss, if yo'all had plenty ob ice water. Dat's whut I was doin', boss! 'Deed I was."

Joe noticed that the boy backed out of the room,

and held one hand behind him. With a quick motion the young pitcher whirled the intruder about and disclosed the fact that the colored lad had taken one of Joe's neckties. But, no sooner had our hero caught sight of it than he burst into a peal of laughter which seemed to startle the boy more than a storm of accusation.

CHAPTER XIX

A NEW HOLD

"WHAT—what all am de mattah, Massa Matson?" asked the colored lad, his eyes bulging, and showing so much white that the rest of his face seemed a shade or two darker. "What all am de mattah? Ain't yo'all put out 'bout me takin' dish yeah tie? I didn't go fo' to steal it, suh! 'Deed an' I didn't. I were jest sort ob borrowin' it fo' to wear at a party I'se gwine t' attend dis ebenin'."

"Put out about you!" laughed Joe. "Indeed I'm not. But don't say you're going to borrow that tie," and he pointed to the one the lad had tried unsuccessfully to conceal. It was of very gaudy hue—broad stripes and prominent dots. "Don't say you were going to borrow it."

"'Deed an' dat's all I were gwine t' do, Massa Matson. I didn't go fo' t' take it fo' keeps. I was a gwine t' ask yo'all fo' de lend ob it, but I thought mebby yo'all wasn't comin' in time, so I jest made up mah mind t' 'propriate it on mah own lookout, an' I was fixin' t' put it back 'fo' yo'all come in. I won't hurt it, 'deed an' I won't, an' I'll bring yo'all

ice water any time yo'all wants it. I—I'd laik mighty much, Massa Matson, t' buy dish yeah tie offen yo'all."

"Buy it!" cried Joe, still laughing, though it was evident that the colored lad could not understand why.

"Well, suh, that is, not exactly *buy* it, 'case I ain't got no money, but yo'all needn't gib me no tips, suh, fo' a—fo' a long time, an' I could buy it dat way. Yes, suh, you needn't gib me no tips fo' two weeks. An' yo'all is so generous, Massa Matson, dat in two weeks' time I'd hab dis tie paid fo'. It's a mighty pert tie, it suah am!"

He gazed admiringly at it.

"Take it, for the love of mush!" cried Joe. "I'm glad you have it!"

"Yo'all am glad, Massa Matson?" repeated the lad, as though he had not heard aright.

"Sure! That tie's been a nightmare to me ever since I bought it. I don't know what possessed me to buy a cross section of the rainbow in the shape of a scarf; but I did it in a moment of aberration, I reckon. Take it away, Sam, and never let me see it again."

"Does yo'all really mean dat?"

"Certainly."

"Well, suh, I thanks yo'all fo' de compliment—I suah does. An' yo'all ain't vexted wif me?"

"Not at all!"

"An'—an' yo'all won't stop giving me tips?"

"No, Sam."

"Golly! Dat's fine! I suah does thank you, mightily, suh! Won't all dem odder coons open dere eyes when dey sees me sportin' dis yeah tie! Yum-yum! I gass so!" and Sam bounced out of the room before Joe might possibly change his mind. The colored lad nearly ran into Charlie Hall, who was coming to have his usual chat with Joe, and the shortstop, seeing the tie dangling from the bell boy's hand, guessed what had happened.

"Was he making free with your things, Joe?" asked Charlie, when Sam had disappeared around a corner of the hall.

"Oh, I caught him taking my tie, that's all."

"Yes, I did the same thing to one of the boys on my floor the other day. I gave him a flea in his ear, too."

"And I gave Sam the tie," laughed Joe.

"You *gave* it to him?"

"Yes, that thing has been haunting me. I never wore it but once and I got disgusted with it." Joe failed to state that Mabel had showed a dislike for the scarf, and that it was her implied opinion that had turned him against it.

"You see," the young pitcher went on, "I didn't know just which of the fellows to give it to, and two or three times I've left it in my hotel room

when we traveled on. And every blamed time some chambermaid would find it, give it to the clerk, and he'd forward it to me. That monstrosity of a scarf has been following me all over the circuit.

"I was getting ready to heave it down some sewer hole, when I came in to find Sam 'borrowing' it. I had to laugh, and I guess he thought I was crazy. Anyhow he's got the tie, and I've gotten rid of it. So we're both satisfied."

"Well, that's a good way to look at it. How are things, anyhow?"

"They might, by a strain, be worse," answered Joe, a bit gloomily. The game that day had been a hard one, and Gregory had used a string of three pitchers, and had only been able to stop the winning streak of Buffington. Joe had been taken out after twirling for a few innings.

"Yes, we didn't do ourselves very proud," agreed Charlie. "And to-morrow we're likely to be dumped. Our record won't stand much of that sort of thing."

"Indeed it won't. Charlie, I've got to do something!" burst out Joe.

"What is it? I can't see but what you're doing your best."

"My hardest, maybe, but not my best. You see this league pitching is different from a college game. I didn't stop to figure out that I'd have to

pitch a deal oftener than when I was at Yale. This is business—the other was fun."

"You're tired, I guess."

"That's it—I'm played out."

"Why don't you take a vacation; or ask Gregory not to work you so often?"

"Can't take any time off, Charlie. I need the money. As for playing the baby-act—I couldn't do that, either."

"No, I reckon not. But what are you going to do?"

"Hanged if I know. But I've got to do something to get back into form. We're going down."

"I know it. Has Gregory said anything."

"No, he's been awfully decent about it, but I know he must think a lot. Yes, something's got to be done."

Joe was rather gloomy, nor was Charlie in any too good spirits. In fact the whole team was in the "dumps," and when they lost the next game they were deeper in than ever.

Some of the papers began running headlines "Pittston Loses Again!" It was galling.

Jimmie Mack worked hard—so did Gregory—and he, and Trainer McGuire, devised all sorts of plans to get the team back in form again. But nothing seemed to answer. The Pittstons dropped to the rear of the first division, and only clung

there by desperate work, and by poor playing on the part of other teams.

In all those bitter, dreary days there were some bright spots for Joe, and he treasured them greatly. One was that his father was no worse, though the matter of the operation was not definitely settled. Another was that he heard occasionally from Mabel—her letters were a source of joy to him.

Thirdly, Old Pop Dutton seemed to be "making good." He kept steadily at work, and had begun to do some real baseball practice. Joe wrote to him, and his letters were answered promptly. Even cynical Gregory admitted that perhaps, after all, the former star pitcher might come into his own again.

"When will you give him a trial?" asked Joe, eagerly.

"Oh, some day. I'll put him in the field when we're sure of an easy game."

The time came when the tail-enders of the league arrived for a series of contests with Pittston, and Pop Dutton, to his delight, was allowed to play. There was nothing remarkable about it, but he made no errors, and once, taking a rather desperate chance on a long fly, he beat it out and retired the batter.

He was roundly applauded for this, and it must have warmed his heart to feel that once more he was on the road he had left so long before. But

coming back was not easy work. Joe realized this, and he knew the old pitcher must have had a hard struggle to keep on the narrow path he had marked out for himself. But Joe's influence was a great help—Dutton said so often. The other players, now that they found their former mate was not bothering them, begging money, or asking for loans, took more kindly to him. But few believed he could "come back," in the full meaning of the words.

"He may be a fairly good fielder, and his batting average may beat mine," said Tooley, "but he'll never be the 'iron man' he once was." And nearly all agreed with him.

Joe was faithful to his protegé. Often the two would saunter out to some quiet place and there pitch and catch for each other. And Joe's trained eye told him that the other's hand had lost little of its former cunning.

Meanwhile the fortunes of Pittston did not improve much. Sometimes they would struggle to second place, only to slip back again, while victorious Clevefield held her place at the top.

There was only one consolation—Pittston did not drop out of the first division. She never got lower than fourth.

Joe was being used less and less on the pitching mound, and his heart was sore. He knew he could make good if only something would happen to give

him back his nerve, or a certain something he lacked. But he could not understand what.

Properly enough it was Pop Dutton who put him on the right track. The two were pitching and catching one day, when Joe delivered what he had always called a "fade-away" ball, made famous by Matthewson, of the New York Giants. As it sailed into Pop's big mitt the veteran called:

"What was that, Joe?"

"Fade-away, of course."

"Show me how you hold the ball when you throw it."

Joe did so. The old pitcher studied a moment, and then said:

"Joe, you've got it wrong. Have you been pitching that way all the while?"

"Always."

"No wonder they have been hitting you. Let me show you something. Stand behind me."

The old pitcher threw at the fence. Joe was amazed at the way the ball behaved. It would have puzzled the best of batters.

"How did you do it?" asked Joe, wonderingly.

"By using a different control, and holding the ball differently. I'll show you. You need a new hold."

CHAPTER XX

JOE'S TRIUMPH

THEN began a lesson, the learning of which proved of great value to Joe in his after life as a ball player. If Old Pop Dutton had not the nerve to "come back" as a pitcher in a big league, at least he could show a rising young one how to correct his faults. And a fault Joe certainly had.

For several years he had been throwing the fade-away ball in the wrong manner. Not entirely wrong, to be sure, or he never would have attained the results he had, but it was sufficiently wrong to prevent him from having perfect control of that style of ball, and perfect control is the first law of pitching.

For some time the two practiced, unobserved, and Joe was glad of this. He felt more hopeful than at any time since his team had commenced to "slump."

"Am I getting there?" Joe anxiously asked of the veteran, one day.

"Indeed you are, boy! But that's enough for to-day. You are using some new muscles in your

arm and hand, and I don't want you to tire out. You'll probably have to pitch to-morrow."

"I only wish I could use this style ball."

"It wouldn't be safe yet."

"No, I suppose not. But I'm going to keep at it."

It was not easy. It is always more difficult to "unlearn" a wrong way of doing a thing, and start over again on the right, than it is to learn the proper way at first. The old method will crop up most unexpectedly; and this happened in Joe's case more times than he liked.

But he persisted and gradually he felt that he was able to deliver the fade-away as it ought to come from a pitcher's hand. Now he waited the opportunity.

Meanwhile baseball matters were going on in rather slow fashion. All the teams, after the fierce rush and enthusiasm of the opening season, had now begun to fall off. The dog-days were upon them, and the heat seemed to take all the energy out of the men.

Still the games went on, with Pittston rising and falling on the baseball thermometer from fourth to second place and occasionally remaining stationary in third. First place was within striking distance several times, but always something seemed to happen to keep Joe's team back.

It was not always poor playing, though occa-

sionally it was due to this. Often it was just fate, luck, or whatever you want to call it. Fielders would be almost certain of a ball rolling toward them, then it would strike a stone or a clod of dirt and roll to one side.

Not much, perhaps, but enough so that the man would miss the ball, and the runner would be safe, by a fraction of time or space. It was heartbreaking.

Joe continued to work at the proper fade-away and he was getting more and more expert in its use. His control was almost perfect. Still he hesitated to use it in a game, for he wanted to be perfect.

A new pitcher—another south-paw, or left-hander—was purchased from another league club, at a high price, and for a time he made good. Joe was fearful lest he be given his release, for really he was not doing as well as he had at first. Truth to tell he was tired out, and Gregory should have realized this.

But he did not until one day a sporting writer, in a sensible article telling of the chances of the different teams in the Central League for winning the pennant, wrote of Joe:

"This young pitcher, of whom bright things were predicted at the opening of the season, has fallen off woefully. At times he shows brilliant flashes of form, but it seems to me that he is going

stale. Gregory should give him a few days off."

Then the manager "woke up."

"Joe, is this true?" he asked, showing the youth the article.

"Well, I am a bit tired, Gregory, but I'm not asking for a vacation," answered Joe.

"I know you're not, but you're going to get it. You just take a run home and see your folks. When you come back I'm going to pitch you in a series of our hardest games. We go up against Clevefield again. You take a rest."

Joe objected, but half-heartedly, and ended by taking the train for home.

His heart felt lighter the moment he had started, and when he got to Riverside, and found his father much improved, Joe was more like himself than at any time since the opening of the ball season. His folks were exceedingly glad to see him, and Joe went about town, renewing old acquaintances, and being treated as a sort of local lion.

Tom Davis, Joe's chum, looked at the young pitcher closely.

"Joe," he said, "you're getting thin. Either you're in love, or you aren't making good."

"Both, I guess," answered Joe, with a short laugh. "But I'm going to make good very soon. You watch the papers."

Joe rejoined his team with a sparkle in his eye and a spring in his step that told how much good

the little vacation had done him. He was warmly welcomed back—only Collin showing no joy.

Truth to tell Collin had been doing some wonderful pitching those last few days, and he was winning games for the team. The advent of Joe gave him little pleasure, for none knew better than he on how slim a margin a pitcher works, nor how easily he may be displaced, not only in the affection of the public, always fickle, but in the estimation of the manager.

"Hang him! I wish he'd stayed away!" muttered Collin. "Now he's fresh and he may get my place again. But I'll find a way to stop him, if Gregory gives him the preference!"

Joe went back at practice with renewed hope. He took Gregory and the catchers into his confidence, and explained about the fade-away. They were enthusiastic over it.

"Save it for Clevefield," advised the manager.

The day when Pittston was to play the top-notchers arrived. There were to be four games on Pittston's grounds, and for the first time since his reformation began, Pop Dutton was allowed to play in an important contest.

"I'm depending on you," Gregory warned him.

"And you won't be disappointed," was the reply. Certainly the old player had improved greatly. His eyes were bright and his skin ruddy and clear.

Joe was a bit nonplussed when Collin was sent in for the opening game. But he knew Gregory had his reasons. And perhaps it was wise, for Collin was always at his best when he could deliver the first ball, and open the game.

Clevefield was shut out in the first inning, and, to the howling delight of the crowd of Pittston sympathizers and "fans," the home team got a run.

This gave the players much-needed confidence, and though the visitors managed to tie the score in their half of the second inning, Pittston went right after them, and got two more tallies.

"We're going to win, Joe!" cried Charlie Hall. "We're going to win. Our hoodoo is busted!"

"I hope so," said the young pitcher, wishing he had a chance to play.

It came sooner than he expected. Collin unexpectedly "blew up," and had to be taken out of the box. Joe was called on, at the proper time, and walked nervously to the mound. But he knew he must conquer this feeling and he looked at Nelson, who was catching. The back-stop smiled, and signalled for a fade-away, but Joe shook his head.

He was not quite ready for that ball yet.

By using straight, swift balls, interspersed with ins and drops, he fooled the batter into striking out. The next man went out on a pop fly, and

Joe teased the third man into striking at an elusive out. Clevefield was retired runless and the ovation to Pittston grew.

But it was not all to be as easy as this. Joe found himself in a tight place, and then, with a catching of his breath, he signalled that he would use the fade-away.

In it shot—the batter smiled confidently—struck—and missed. He did it twice before he realized what was happening, and then when Joe felt sure that his next fade-away would be hit, he swiftly changed to an up-shoot that ended the matter.

Clevefield fought hard, and once when Joe was hit for a long fly, that seemed good for at least two bases, Pop Dutton was just where he was most needed, and made a sensational catch.

There was a howl of delight, and Gregory said to Joe afterward:

"Your man is making good."

Joe was immensely pleased. And when, a little later, at a critical point in the game, he struck out the third man, again using his famous fade-away, his triumph was heralded in shouts and cries, for Pittston had won. It was a triumph for Joe in two ways—his own personal one, and in the fact that he had been instrumental in having Pop Dutton play—and Pop's one play, at least that day, saved a run that would have tied the score.

CHAPTER XXI

A DANGER SIGNAL

"Boys, we're on the right road again!" exclaimed the enthusiastic manager at the conclusion of the game, when the team was in the dressing room. "Another like this to-morrow, and one the next day, if it doesn't rain, and we'll be near the top."

"Say, you don't want much," remarked Jimmie Mack, half sarcastically, but with a laugh. "What do you think we are anyhow; wonders?"

"We'll have to be if we're going to bring home the pennant," retorted Gregory.

"And we're going to do it!" declared Joe, grimly.

Collin went to pieces in more ways than one that day. Probably his failure in the game, added to Joe's triumph, made him reckless, for he went back to his old habit of gambling, staying up nearly all night, and was in no condition to report for the second game of the series.

"He makes me tired!" declared Gregory. "I'd

write his release in a minute," he went on, speaking to Jimmie Mack, "only I'm up to my neck in expenses now, and I can't afford to buy another pitcher. I need all I've got, and Collin is good when he wants to be."

"Yes, it's only his pig-headedness about Joe that sets him off. But I think we've got a great find in Matson."

"So do I. There was a time when I was rather blue about Joe, but he seems to have come back wonderfully."

"Yes," agreed Jimmie Mack, "that fade-away of his is a wonder, thanks to Pop Dutton."

"Pop himself is the greatest wonder of all," went on Gregory. "I never believed it possible. I've seen the contrary happen so many times that I guess I've grown skeptical."

"He and Joe sure do make a queer team," commented the assistant manager. "Joe watches over him like a hen with one chicken."

"Well, I guess he has to. A man like Pop who has been off the right road always finds lots of temptation ready and waiting to call him back. But Joe can keep him straight.

"Now come over here. I want to talk to you, and plan out the rest of the season. We're in a bad way, not only financially, but for the sake of our reputations."

If Joe could have heard this he would have

worried, especially about the financial end. For he counted very much on his baseball money—in fact, his family needed it greatly.

Mr. Matson's savings were tied up in investments that had turned out badly, or were likely to, and his expenses were heavy on account of the doctor's and other bills. Joe's salary was a big help. He also earned something extra by doing some newspaper work that was paid for generously.

But Joe counted most on the final games of the series, which would decide the pennant. These were always money-makers, and, in addition, the winning team always played one or more exhibition games with some big league nine, and these receipts were large.

"But will we win the pennant?" queried Joe of himself. "We've got to—if dad is going to have his operation. We've just got to!"

The news from home had been uncertain. At one time Dr. Birch had decided that an operation must be performed at once, and then had come a change when it had to be delayed. But it seemed certain that, sooner or later, it would have to be undertaken, if the inventor's eyesight was to be saved.

"So you see we've just got to win," said Joe to Charlie Hall.

"I see," was the answer. "Well, I'll do my

share toward it, old man," and the two clasped hands warmly. Joe was liking Charlie more and more every day. He was more like a college chum than a mate on a professional team.

But Pittston was not to have a victory in the second game with Clevefield. The latter sent in a new pitcher who "played tag," to use a slang expression, with Joe and his mates, and they lost the contest by a four to one score. This in spite of the fact that Joe did some good work at pitching, and "Old Pop," as he was beginning to be called, knocked a three-bagger. Dutton was one of those rare birds, a good pitcher and a good man with the stick. That is, he had been, and now he was beginning to come back to himself.

There was a shadow of gloom over Pittston when they lost the second game, after having won the first against such odds, and there was much speculation as to how the other two contests would go.

Gregory revised his batting order for the third game, and sent in his latest purchase, one of the south-paws, to do the twirling. But he soon made a change in pitchers, and called on Tooley, who also was a left-hander.

"I may need you later, Joe," he said as he arranged to send in a "pinch" hitter at a critical moment. "Don't think that I'm slighting you, boy."

"I don't. I understand."

"How's your fade-away?"

"All right, I guess."

"Good. You'll probably have to use it."

And Joe did. He was sent in at the seventh, when the Clevefield nine was three runs ahead, and Joe stopped the slump. Then, whether it was this encouragement, or whether the other team went to pieces, did not develop, but the game ended with Pittston a winner by two runs.

The crowd went wild, for there had been a most unexpected ending, and so sure had some of the "fans" been that the top-notchers would come out ahead, that they had started to leave.

But the unexpected happens in baseball as often as in football, and it did in this case.

Pittston thus had two out of the four games, and the even break had increased her percentage to a pleasing point. If they could have taken the fourth they would have fine hopes of the pennant, but it was not to be. An even break, though there was a close finish in the last game, was the best they could get.

However, this was better than for some time, and Gregory and his associates were well pleased.

Then came a series of games in the different league cities, and matters were practically unchanged. In turn Buffington, Loston and Man-

hattan were visited, the Pittston nine doing well, but nothing remarkable.

Joe seemed firmly established in the place he most desired, and his fine delivery was increasing in effectiveness each day. His fade-away remained a puzzle to many, though some fathomed it and profited thereby. But Joe did not use it too often.

The secret of good pitching lies in the "cross-fire," and in varying the delivery. No pitcher can continue to send in the same kind of balls in regular order to each batter. He must study his man and use his brains.

Joe knew this. He also knew that he was not alone a pitcher, but a ball player, and that he must attend to his portion of the diamond. Too many twirlers forget this, and Joe frequently got in on sensational plays that earned him almost as much applause as his box-work did.

Joe was always glad to get back to Pittston to play games. He was beginning to feel that it was a sort of "home town," though he had few friends there. He made many acquaintances and he was beginning to build up a reputation for himself. He was frequently applauded when he came out to play, and this means much to a baseball man.

Then, too, Joe was always interested in Pop Dutton. He was so anxious that the former fine pitcher should have his chance to "come back." Often when scouts from bigger leagues than the

Central stopped off to more or less secretly watch the Pittstons play, Joe would have a talk with them. Sometimes he spoke of Pop, but the scouts did not seem interested. They pretended that they had no special object in view, or, if they did, they hinted that it was some other player than Dutton.

To whisper a secret I might say that it was Joe himself who was under observation on many of these occasions, for his fame was spreading. But he was a modest youth.

Joe was not inquisitive, but he learned, in a casual way, that Pop Dutton was seemingly on the right road to success and prosperity. It was somewhat of a shock to the young pitcher, then, one evening, as he was strolling down town in Pittston, to see his protegé in company with a shabbily dressed man.

"I hope he hasn't taken to going with those tramps again," mused Joe. "That would be too bad."

Resolving to make sure of his suspicions, and, if necessary, hold out a helping hand, the young pitcher quickened his pace until he was close behind the twain.

He could not help but hear part of the conversation.

"Oh, come on!" he caught, coming from Dutton's companion. "What's the harm?"

"No, I'll not. You don't know how hard it is to refuse, but I—I can't—really I can't."

"You mean you won't?"

"Put it that way if you like."

"Well, then, I do like, an' I don't like it! I'll say that much. I don't like it. You're throwin' me down, an' you're throwin' the rest of us down. I don't like it for a cent!"

"I can't help that," replied Dutton, doggedly.

"Well, maybe *we* can help it, then. You're leaving us in the lurch just when we need you most. Come on, now, be a sport, Pop!"

"No, I've been too much of a sport in the past —that's the trouble."

"So you won't join us?"

"No."

"Will you come out and tell the boys so? They maybe won't believe me."

"Oh, well, I can't see any harm in that."

"Come on, then, they'll be glad to see you again."

Joe wandered what was afoot. It was as though he saw a danger signal ahead of Pop Dutton.

CHAPTER XXII

VICTORY

Joe hardly knew what to do. He realized that all his efforts toward getting the old ball player back on the right road might go for naught if Pop went off with these loose companions.

And yet would he relish being interfered with by the young pitcher? Pop was much older than Joe, but so far he had shown a strong liking for the younger man, and had, half-humorously, done his bidding. Indeed Pop was under a deep debt not only of gratitude to Joe, but there had been a financial one as well, though most of that was now paid.

"But I don't want to see him slip back," mused Joe, as he walked along in the shadows, taking care to keep far enough back from the twain. But Pop never looked around. He seemed engrossed in his companion.

"What shall I do?" Joe asked himself.

He half hoped that some of the other members of the nine might come along, and accost Pop,

perhaps taking him off with them, as they had done several times of late. For the old player was becoming more and more liked—he was, in a way, coming into his own again, and he had a fund of baseball stories to which the younger men never tired listening.

"If some of them would only come along!" whispered Joe, but none did.

He kept on following the two until he saw them go into one of the less disreputable lodging houses in a poor quarter of the city. It was a house where, though some respectable workingmen, temporarily embarrassed, made their homes for a time, there was more often a rowdy element, consisting of tramps, and, in some cases, criminals.

At election time it harbored "floaters" and "repeaters," and had been the scene of many a police raid.

"I wonder what he can want by going in there?" thought Joe. "It's a good thing Gregory can't see him, or he'd sure say my experiment was a failure. It may be, after all; but I'm not going to give up yet. Now, shall I go in, and pretend I happened by casually, or shall I wait outside?"

Joe debated the two propositions within himself. The first he soon gave up. He was not in the habit of going into such places, and the presence of a well-dressed youth, more or less known

to the public as a member of the Pittston nine, would excite comment, if nothing else. Besides, it might arouse suspicion of one sort or another. Then, too, Pop might guess why Joe had followed him, and resent it.

"I'll just have to wait outside," decided Joe, "and see what I can do when Pop comes out."

It was a dreary wait. From time to time Joe saw men slouch into the place, and occasionally others shuffled out; but Pop did not come, nor did his ragged companion appear.

Joe was getting tired, when his attention was attracted to a detective whom he knew, sauntering rather aimlessly past on the opposite side of the street.

"Hello!" thought the young ball player, "I wonder what's up?" He eyed the officer closely, and was surprised, a moment later, to see him joined by a companion.

"Something sure is in the wind," decided Joe. "I'm going to find out."

He strolled across the highway and accosted the detective with whom he had a slight acquaintance.

"Oh, it's Matson, the Pittston pitcher!" exclaimed the officer.

"What's up, Regan?" asked Joe.

"Oh, nothing much. Do you know Farley, my side partner? Farley, this is Matson—Baseball

Joe, they call him. Some nifty little pitcher, too, let me tell you."

"Thanks," laughed Joe, as he shook hands with the other detective.

"Why, we're looking for a certain party," went on Regan. "I don't mind telling you that. We'll probably pull that place soon," and he nodded toward the lodging house. "Some of the regulars will be along in a little while," he added.

"Pull," I may explain, is police language for "raid," or search a certain suspected place.

"Anything big?" asked Joe.

"Oh, nothing much. There's been some pocket-picking going on, and a few railroad jobs pulled off. A lot of baggage belonging to wealthy folks has been rifled on different lines, all over the country, and we think we're on the track of some of the gang. We're going to pull the place and see how many fish we can get in the net."

Joe did not know what to do. If the place was to be raided soon it might mean that his friend, the old pitcher, would be among those arrested. Joe was sure of his friend's innocence, but it would look bad for him, especially after the life he had led. It might also be discouraging to Pop, and send him back to his old companions again.

"How long before you'll make the raid?" asked Joe.

"In about half an hour, I guess," replied Regan.

"Why, are you going to stick around and see it?"

"I might. But there's a friend of mine in there," spoke Joe, "and I wouldn't like him to get arrested."

"A friend of yours?" repeated Regan, wonderingly.

"Yes. Oh, he's not a hobo, though he once was, I'm afraid. But he's reformed. Only tonight, however, he went out with one of his old companions. I don't know what for. But I saw him go in there, and that's why I'm here. I'm waiting for him to come out."

"Then the sooner he does the better," observed Farley, grimly. "It's a bad place."

"Look here," said Joe, eagerly; "could you do me a favor, Mr. Regan?"

"Anything in reason, Joe."

"Could you go in there and warn my friend to get out. I could easily describe him to you. In fact, I guess you must know him—Pop Dutton."

"Is Old Pop in there?" demanded the officer, in surprise.

"Yes," responded Joe, "but I'm sure he's all right. I don't believe you want him."

"No, he's not on our list," agreed Regan. "Well, say, I guess I could do that for you, Joe. Only one thing, though. If Farley or I happen in there there may be a scare, and the birds we want will get away."

"How can we do it, then?" asked Joe.

A figure came shuffling up the dark street, and, at the sight of the two detectives and the young pitcher, hesitated near a gas lamp.

"Hello! There's Bulldog!" exclaimed Regan, but in a low voice. "He'll do. We'll send him in and have him tip Pop off to come out. Bulldog is on our staff," he added. "He tips us off to certain things. Here, Bulldog!" he called, and a short, squat man shuffled up. His face had a canine expression, which, Joe surmised, had gained him his name.

"Slip into Genty's place, Bulldog," said Regan in a low voice, "and tell a certain party to get out before the bulls come. Do you know Pop Dutton?"

"Sure. He and I——"

"Never mind about that part of it," interrupted the detective. "Just do as I tell you, and do it quietly. You can stay in. You might pick up something that would help us."

"What, me stay in there when the place is going to be pulled, and get pinched? Not on your life!" and the man turned away.

"Hold on!" cried Regan. "We'll get you out all right, same as we always do. You're too valuable to us to go to jail for long."

Then, as Bulldog started for the dark entrance to the lodging house, Joe realized that he had seen

what is called a "stool-pigeon," a character hated by all criminals, and not very much respected by the police whom they serve. A "stool-pigeon" consorts with criminals, that he may overhear their plans, and betray them to the police. Often he is himself a petty criminal. In a sense he does a duty to the public, making it more easy for the authorities to arrest wrong-doers—but no one loves a "stool-pigeon." They are the decoy ducks of the criminal world.

I am making this explanation, and portraying this scene in Joe Matson's career, not because it is pleasant to write about, for it is not. I would much rather take you out on the clean diamond, where you could hear the "swat" of the ball. But as Joe's efforts to make a new man of the old pitcher took him into this place I can do no less than chronicle the events as they happened. And a little knowledge of the sadder, darker and unhappy side of life may be of value to boys, in deterring them from getting into a position where it would appeal to them—appeal wrongly, it is true, but none the less strongly.

The Bulldog had not been in the building more than a minute before the door opened again, and Pop Dutton, alone, and looking hastily around, came out. Joe got in a shadow where he could not be seen. He did not want his friend humili-

ated, now that he had seen him come out victorious.

For the young pitcher could see that Pop was the same straight and sober self he had been since getting back on the right road. His association with his former companions had evidently not tempted him.

"Oh, I'm glad!" exulted Joe.

Pop Dutton looked curiously at the two detectives.

"Thanks," he said briefly, as he passed them, and they knew that he understood. Not for a long time afterward did the former pitcher know that to Joe he owed so much. For, though his intention in going to the rendezvous of the unfortunates of the under-world was good, still it might have been misconstrued. Now there was no danger.

Afterward Joe learned that Pop had been urged by the man he met on the street to take part in a robbery. The old pitcher refused, but his false companion tried to lure him back to his old life, on the plea that only from his own lips would his associates believe that Pop had reformed. And Pop made them plainly understand that he had.

Pop Dutton passed on down the street, and, waiting a little while, Joe followed. He did not care to see the raid. The young pitcher soon

reached his hotel, and he felt that Pop was safe in his own boarding house.

The next morning Joe read of the wholesale arrests in the lodging house, though it was said that the quarry the detectives most hoped to get escaped in the confusion.

"Baggage robbers, eh?" mused Joe. "I wonder if they were the ones who went through Reggie Varley's valise? If they could be caught it would clear me nicely, providing I could prove it was they."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TRAMP AGAIN

Baseball again claimed the attention of Joe and his mates. They were working hard, for the end of the season was in sight, and the pennant ownership was not yet decided.

Clevefield was still at the top of the list, but Pittston was crowding her hard, and was slowly creeping up. Sometimes this would be the result of her players own good work, and again it would be because some other team had a streak of bad luck which automatically put Joe's team ahead.

The young pitcher was more like himself than at any time since he had joined the club. He was really pitching "great" ball, and Gregory did not hesitate to tell him so. And, more than this, Joe was doing some good work with the bat. His average was slowly but steadily mounting.

Joe would never be a great performer in this line, and none realized it better than himself. No clubs would be clamoring for his services as a pinch hitter. On the other hand many a pitcher

in the big leagues had not Joe's batting average, though of course this might have been because they were such phenomenal twirlers, and saved all their abilities for the mound.

Also did Joe pay attention to the bases. He wished he was a south-paw, at times, or a left-hand pitcher, for then he could more easily have thrown to first. But it was too late to change now, and he made up his mind to be content to work up his reputation with his good right arm.

But, even with that, he made some surprisingly good put-outs when runners took chances and got too long a lead. So that throughout the circuit the warning began to be whispered:

"Look out for Matson when you're on first!"

Joe realized that a good pitcher has not only to play the game from the mound. He must field his position as well, and the failure of many an otherwise good pitcher is due to the fact that they forget this.

Much of Joe's success, at this time, was due to the coaching and advice he received from Pop Dutton. The veteran could instruct if he could not pitch yet, and Joe profited by his experience.

No reference was made by Joe to the night Pop had gone to the lodging house, nor did the old pitcher say anything to his young friend. In fact he did not know Joe had had any hand in the matter. Pop Dutton went on his reformed way.

He played the game, when he got a chance, and was increasingly good at it.

"Joe!" he cried one day, when he had played a full game, "we're getting there! I hope I'll soon be pitching."

"So do I!" added Joe, earnestly. True, the game Pop had played at centre for the full nine innings was with the near-tailenders of the Central League, but it showed that the veteran had "come back" sufficiently to last through the hard work.

"How is your arm?" asked Joe.

"Not good enough to use on the mound yet, I'm sorry to say," was Pop's answer. "I guess I'll have to have that operation, after all. But I don't see how I can manage it. I'm trying to pay back some of my old debts——"

"Don't let that part worry you," spoke Joe, quickly. "If things turn out right I may be able to help you."

"But you've done a lot already, Joe."

"I'll do more—if I can. Just wait until the close of the season, when we have the pennant."

What Joe meant was that he would have the money for an operation on the pitcher's arm if the cash was not needed to put Mr. Matson's eyes in shape through the attention of a surgeon.

And this matter was still undecided, much to the worriment of Joe, his mother and sister, to say nothing of his father. But it is necessary, in

such matters, to proceed slowly, and not to take any chances.

Joe felt the strain. His regular salary was much needed at home, and he was saving all he could to provide for his father's possible operation. That cost would not be light.

Then there was Pop Dutton to think of. Joe wanted very much to see the old player fully on his feet again. He did not know what to do, though, should all the money he might get from the pennant series be required for Mr. Matson.

"Well, I'll do the best I can," thought Joe. "Maybe if Gregory and the others see how well Pop is doing they'll take up a collection and pay for the operation. It oughtn't to cost such an awful lot."

Joe shook his head in a puzzled way. Really it was a little too much for him to carry on his young shoulders, but he had the fire of youth in his veins, and youth will dare much—which is as it should be, perhaps.

Then, too, Joe had to be on edge all the time in order to pitch winning ball. No pitcher is, or can be, at top notch all the while. He can hardly serve in two big games in quick succession, and yet Joe did this several times, making an enviable record for himself.

The rivalry between him and Collin grew, though Joe did nothing to inflame the other's dis-

like. But Collin was very bitter, and Pop gave Joe some warning hints.

"Oh, I don't believe he'd do anything underhanded," said Joe, not taking it seriously.

"Well, be on the lookout," advised the veteran. "I don't like Collin, and never did."

There came a series of rainy days, preventing the playing of games, and everyone fretted. The players, even Joe, grew stale, though Gregory tried to keep them in form by sending them off on little trips when the grounds were too wet even for practise.

Then came fine bracing weather, and Pittston began to stride ahead wonderfully. It was now only a question of whether Joe's team or Clevefield would win pennant honors, and, in any event, there would have to be several games played between the two nines to decide the matter.

This was due to the fact that the league schedule called for a certain number of games to be played by each club with every other club, and a number of rainy days, and inability to run off double headers, had caused a congestion.

Pittston kept on playing in good form, and Joe was doing finely. So much so that on one occasion when a big league scout was known to be in attendance, Gregory said in a way that showed he meant it:

"Joe, they're going to draft you, sure."

The larger or major league clubs, those rated as AA, have, as is well known, the right to select any player they choose from a minor league, paying, of course a certain price. Thus the big leagues are controllers in a way of the players themselves, for the latter cannot go to any club they choose, whereas any big league club can pick whom it chooses from the little or "bush" leagues. If two or more of the big clubs pick the same player there is a drawing to decide who gets him.

"Well, I'm not worrying," returned Joe, with a smile.

After a most successful game, in Washburg, which team had been playing good ball—the contest having been won by Pittston—Joe was walking across the diamond with Pop Dutton, when the young pitcher saw approaching them the same tramp with whom his protegé had entered the lodging house that night.

"Hello, Pop!" greeted the shabby man. "I want t' see you." He leered familiarly. Pop Dutton stopped and gazed with half-frightened eyes at Joe.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE TRACK

"WELL, are you comin'?" demanded the tramp, as Dutton did not answer. "I said I want to see you, an' I'm dead broke! Took all I had t' git a seat on th' bleachers t' see de bloomin' game."

"Well, you saw a good game—I'll say that," commented the old player, though his voice was a bit husky. He seemed to be laboring under some nervous strain.

"Huh! I didn't come to see th' game. I want t' see you. Are you comin'?"

Pop did not answer at once. About him and Joe, who still stood at his side, surged the other players and a section of the crowd. Some of the members of the team looked curiously at Pop and the ragged individual who had accosted him. Collin, the pitcher, sneered openly, and laughed in Joe's face.

"Who's your swell friend?" he asked, nodding toward the tramp. Joe flushed, but did not answer.

"Well, I'm waitin' fer youse," spoke the tramp,

and his tone was surly. "Come on, I ain't got all day."

"Nothing doing," said Pop, shortly. "I'm not coming with you, Hogan."

"You're not!"

There was the hint of a threat in the husky tones, and the glance from the blood-shot eyes was anything but genial.

"No, I'm not coming," went on Pop, easily. He seemed to have recovered his nerve now, and glanced more composedly at Joe.

"Huh! Well, I like that!" sneered the tramp. "You're gettin' mighty high-toned, all of a sudden! It didn't used to be this way."

"I've changed—you might as well know that, Hogan," went on Pop. There were not so many about them now. All the other players had passed on.

"Well, then, if you won't come with me, come across with some coin!" demanded the other. "I need money."

"You'll not get any out of me."

"What!"

There was indignant protest in the husky voice.

"I said you'll not get any out of me."

"Huh! We'll see about that. Now look here, Pop Dutton, either you help me out, or——"

Dutton turned to one of the officers who kept order on the ball field.

"Jim, see that this fellow gets out," the old player said, quietly.

"All right, Pop. What you say goes," was the reply. "Now then, move on out of here. We want to clean up for to-morrow's game," spoke the officer shortly to the man whom Pop had addressed as Hogan.

"Ho! So that's your game is it—*Mister* Dutton," and the ragged fellow sneered as he emphasized the "Mister."

"If you want to call it a game—yes," answered Dutton, calmly. "I'm done with you and yours. I'm done with that railroad business. I don't want to see you again, and I'm not going to give you any more money."

"You're not!"

"I am not. You've bled me enough."

"Oh, I've bled you enough; have I? I've bled you enough, my fine bird! Well then, you wait! You'll see how much more I'll bleed you! You'll sing another tune soon or I'm mistaken. I've bled you enough; eh? Well you listen here! I ain't bled you half as much as I'm goin' to. And some of the others are goin' t' come in on the game! You wait! That's all!"

And he uttered a lot of strong expressions that the ground officer hushed by hustling him off the field.

Joe took no part in this. He stood quietly at

the side of Pop as though to show, by his presence, that he believed in him, trusted him and would help him, in spite of this seeming disgrace.

They were alone—those two. The young and promising pitcher, and the old and almost broken down "has-been." And yet the "has-been" had won a hard-fought victory.

Pop Dutton glanced curiously at Joe.

"Well?" he asked, as if in self-defence.

"What's the answer?" inquired Joe, trying to make his tones natural. "Was it a hold-up?"

"Sort of. That's one of the fellows I used to trail in with, before you helped me out of the ditch."

"Is he a railroad man?" asked Joe. "I thought he said something about the railroad."

"He pretends to be," said Dutton. "But he isn't any more. He used to be, I believe; but he went wrong, just as I did. Just as I might be now, but for you, Joe."

His voice broke, and there was a hint of tears in his eyes.

"Oh, forget it!" said Joe, easily. "I didn't do anything. But what sort of a fellow is this one, anyhow?"

The man had been hustled off the grounds by the officer.

"Oh, he's just a plain tramp, the same as I was. Only he hasn't anything to do with the railroad

any more, except to rob baggage. That's his specialty. He hangs around the depots, and opens valises and such when he gets a chance."

"He does!" cried Joe, with sudden interest. "Is he the fellow the detectives wanted to get the time they raided the Keystone Lodging House?"

Pop Dutton flushed red.

"What—what do you know about that?" he asked.

"Oh—I—er—I happened to be around there when the police were getting ready to close in," answered Joe, truthfully enough. He did not want to embarrass his friend by going into details.

"Oh," said Pop, evidently in relief. "Yes, I think he was one of the gang they wanted to get. But they didn't."

"He's taking a chance—coming here now."

"Oh, he's let his whiskers grow, and I suppose he thinks that disguises him. He's had a hold over me, Joe, but I'm glad to say he hasn't any longer. I won't go into details, but I will say that he had me in his power. Now I'm out."

"So he used to rob travelers' baggage, did he?"

"Yes, and he does yet I guess, when he gets the chance. Jewelry is his specialty. I remember once he was telling me of a job he did.

"It was at a small station. I forget just where. Anyhow this fellow—Hogan is one of his names—

he pretended to be a railroad freight brakeman. You know they are rather roughly dressed, for their work is not very clean. Well, he got a chance to open a certain valise. I remember it because he said it was such an odd bag."

Joe felt a queer sensation. It was as though he had heard this same story years before. Yet he knew what it meant—what it was leading to—as well as if it had all been printed out.

"Hogan made a good haul, as he called it," went on Pop. "He thought he was going to have a lot of trouble opening the bag when he came into the station pretending he wanted a drink of water. It was a foreign-make valise, he said, but it opened easier than he thought and he got a watch and a lot of trinkets that ladies like."

"He did?" asked Joe, and his voice sounded strange, even to himself.

"Yes. Why, do you know anything about it?" asked Pop in some surprise.

"I might," said Joe, trying to speak calmly. "Would you remember how this bag looked if I told you?"

"I think so."

"Was it a yellow one, of a kind of leather that looked like walrus hide, and did it have two leather handles, and brass clips in the shape of lions' heads?"

"Yes—that's exactly how Hogan described it," said Pop. "But—why——"

"And would you remember the name of the station at which the robbery took place?" asked Joe. "That is if you heard it?"

"I think so."

"Was it Fairfield?"

"That's it! Why, Joe, what does this mean? How did you know all this? What is Hogan to you?

"Nothing much, Pop, unless he proves to be the fellow who took the stuff I was accused of taking," answered Joe, trying to speak calmly. "Do you know where we could find this man again?"

"You mean Hogan?"

"Yes. I'm going to tackle him. Of course it's only a chance, but I believe it's a good one."

"Oh, I guess we can easily locate him," said Pop. "He hasn't any money to get far away."

"Then come on!" cried Joe, eagerly. "I think I'm at last on the track of the man who took the stuff from Reggie Varley's valise. Pop, this means more to me than you can imagine. I believe I'm going to be cleared at last!"

"Cleared! You cleared? What of?" asked the old ball player in bewilderment.

"I'll tell you," said Joe, greatly excited. "Come on!"

CHAPTER XXV

REGGIE'S AUTO

HARDLY understanding what was afoot, and not in the least appreciating Joe's excitement, Pop Dutton followed the young pitcher across the diamond.

"What are you going to do?" asked the old player, as he hurried on after Joe.

"Get into my street togs the first thing. Then I'm going to try and find that fellow—Hogan, did you say his name was?"

"One of 'em, yes. But what do you want of him?"

"I want him to tell when and where he took that stuff from the queer valise. And I want to know if he has any of it left, by any chance, though I don't suppose he has. And, in the third place, I want to make him say that I didn't take the stuff."

Pop Dutton drew a long breath.

"You, Joe!" he exclaimed. "You accused?"

"Yes. It's a queer story. But I'm beginning to see the end of it now! Come on!"

They hurried into the dressing rooms. Most

of the other players had gone, for Joe and Pop had been delayed out on the diamond talking to Hogan. Charlie Hall was there, however, and he looked curiously at Joe.

"Anything the matter?" asked the young shortstop.

"Well, there may be—soon," answered his friend. "I'll see you later. Tell Gregory that I may be going out of town for a while, but I'll sure be back in time for to-morrow's game."

"All right," said Charlie, as he went in to take a shower bath.

"Now, Pop," spoke Joe, as he began dressing, "where can we find this Hogan?"

"Oh, most likely he'll be down around Kelly's place," naming a sort of lodging-house hang-out for tramps and men of that class.

"Then down there we'll go!" decided the young pitcher. "I'm going to have an interview with Hogan. If I'd only known he was the one responsible for the accusation against me I'd have held on to him while he was talking to you. But I didn't realize it until afterward, and then the officer had put him outside. He was lost in the crowd. But suppose he isn't at Kelly's?"

"Oh, someone there can tell us where to find him. But it's a rough place, Joe."

"I suppose so. You don't mind going there; do you?"

"Well, no, not exactly. True, a lot of the men I used to trail in with may be there, but, no matter. They can't do any more than gibe me."

"We could take a detective along," suggested Joe.

"No, I think we can do better by ourselves. I don't mind. You see after I—after I went down and out—I used to stop around at all the baseball towns, and in that way I got to know most of these lodging-house places. This one in Washburg is about as rough as any."

"How did you come to know Hogan?"

"Oh, I just met him on the road. He used to be a good railroad man, but he went down, and now he's no good. He's a boastful sort, and that's how he came to tell me about the valise. But I never thought you'd be mixed up in it."

"Of course I can't be dead certain this is the same valise that was robbed," said Joe; "but it's worth taking a chance on. I do hope we can find him."

But they were doomed to disappointment. When they reached Kelly's lodging-house Hogan had gone, and the best they could learn, in the sullen replies given by the habitués, was that the former railroad man had taken to the road again, and might be almost anywhere.

"Too bad!" exclaimed Pop sympathetically, as he and Joe came out.

"Yes, it is," assented the young pitcher, "for I did want Reggie Varley to know who really robbed his valise." Perhaps Joe also wanted a certain other person to know. But he did not mention this, so of course I cannot be sure. "Better luck next time!" exclaimed the young pitcher as cheerfully as he could.

They endeavored to trace whither Hogan had gone, but without success. The best they could ascertain was that he had "hopped a freight," for some point west.

Joe did not allow the disappointment to interfere with his baseball work. In the following games with Washburg he fitted well into the tight places, and succeeded, several times, when the score was close, in being instrumental in pulling the Pittston team out a winner.

On one occasion the game had gone for nine innings without a run on either side, and only scattered hits. Both pitchers—Joe for Pittston, and young Carrolton Lloyd for Washburg—were striving hard for victory.

The game came to the ending of the ninth, with Washburg up. By fortunate chance, and by an error on the part of Charlie Hall, the home team got two men on bases, and only one out. Then their manager made a mistake.

Instead of sending in a pinch hitter—for a hit was all that was needed to score the winning run,

the manager let the regular batting order be followed, which brought up the Washburg pitcher. Lloyd was tired out, and, naturally, was not at his best. He popped up a little fly, which Joe caught, and then sending the ball home quickly our hero caught the man coming in from third, making a double play, three out and necessitating the scoring of another zero in the ninth frame for Washburg.

Then came the tenth inning. Perhaps it was his weariness or the memory of how he had had his chance and lost it that made Lloyd nervous. Certainly he went to pieces, and giving one man his base on balls, allowed Joe to make a hit. Then came a terrific spell of batting and when it was over Pittston had four runs.

It was then Joe's turn to hold the home team hitless, so that they might not score, and he did, to the great delight of the crowd.

This one feat brought more fame to Joe than he imagined. He did not think so much of it himself, which is often the case with things that we do. But, in a way, it was the indirect cause of his being drafted to a big league, later on.

The season was now drawing to a close. The race for the pennant was strictly between Pittston and Clevefield, with the chances slightly in favor of the latter. This was due to the fact that there

were more veteran players in her ranks, and she had a better string of pitchers.

A week or so more would tell the tale. Pittston and Clevefield would play off the final games, the best three out of four, two in one town and two in the other.

Interest in the coming contests was fast accumulating and there was every prospect of generous receipts.

The winners of the pennant would come in for a large share of the gate receipts, and all of the players in the two leading teams were counting much on the money they would receive.

Joe, as you may well guess, planned to use his in two ways. The major part would go toward defraying the expenses of his father's operation. It had not yet been definitely settled that one would be performed, but the chances were that one would have to be undertaken. Then, too, Joe wanted to finance the cost of getting Dutton's arm into shape. A well-known surgeon had been consulted, and had said that a slight operation on one of the ligaments would work wonders. It would be rather costly, however.

"Joe, I'm not going to let you do it," said Pop, when this was spoken of.

"You can't help yourself," declared Joe. "I saved your life—at least I'm not modest when it comes to that, you see—and so I have, in a way,

the right to say what I shall do to you. Besides, if we win the pennant it will be due, as much as anything, to the instruction you gave me. Now will you be good!"

"I guess I'll have to," agreed Pop, laughingly.

Pittston closed all her games with the other teams, excepting only Clevefield. The pennant race was between these two clubs. Arrangements had been made so that the opening game would be played on the Pittston grounds. Then the battle-scene would shift to Clevefield, to come back to Pittston, and bring the final—should the fourth game be needed, to Clevefield.

"If we could only win three straight it would be fine," said Joe.

"It's too much to hope," returned Pop.

It was the day before the first of the pennant games. The Pittstons had gone out for light practice on their home grounds, which had been "groomed" for the occasion. As far as could be told Pittston looked to be a winner, but there is nothing more uncertain than baseball.

As Joe and his mates came off the field after practice there shuffled up to the veteran player a trampish-looking man. At first Joe thought this might be Hogan again, but a second look convinced him otherwise. The man hoarsely whispered something to the old pitcher.

"He says Hogan and a gang of tramps are in

a sort of camp in Shiller's Woods," said Pop, naming a place that was frequently the abiding place of "gentlemen of the road."

"He is?" cried Joe. "Then let's make a beeline for there. I've just got to get this thing settled! Are you with me, Pop?"

"I sure am. But how are we going to get out there? It's outside the city limits, no car line goes there, and trains don't stop."

"Then we've got to have an auto," decided Joe. "I'll see if we can hire one."

He was on his way to the dressing rooms, when, happening to glance through the big open gate of the ball ground he saw a sight that caused him to exclaim:

"The very thing! It couldn't be better. I can kill two birds with one stone. There's our auto, and the man in it is the very one I want to convince of my innocence! That's Reggie Varley. I'll make him take us to Shiller's Woods! We'll catch Hogan there. Come on!"

Never stopping to think of the peculiar coincidence that had brought Reggie on the scene just when he was most needed, Joe sprinted for the panting auto, Pop following wonderingly.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRAMP RENDEZVOUS

"COME on!" cried Joe to Reggie Varley, not giving that astonished young man a chance to greet him. "Come on! Got plenty of gas?"

"Gas? Yes, of course. But where? What is it? Are they after you?"

"Not at all. We're after *them!*" laughed Joe. He could afford to laugh now, for he felt that he was about to be vindicated.

"But I—er—I don't understand," spoke Reggie, slowly. "Where is it you want to go?"

"After the tramp who rifled the valise you suspected me of opening in that way-station some time ago," answered Joe quickly. "We're after him to prove I didn't do it!"

"Oh, but my dear Matson—really now, I don't believe you took it. Sis went for me red-hot, you know, after you told her. She called me all kinds of a brute for even mentioning it to you, and really——"

He paused rather helplessly, while Joe, taking

the situation into his own hands, climbed up beside Reggie, who was alone in his big car. The young pitcher motioned for Pop to get into the tonneau, and the veteran did so, still wondering what was going to happen.

"It's all right," laughed Joe, more lighthearted than he had been in many months. "If you'll take us to Shiller's Woods you may see something that will surprise you."

"But still I don't understand."

Joe explained briefly how Hogan, the railroad tramp, had boasted of robbing a valise corresponding to Reggie's. Hogan was now within five miles of Pittston, hiding in a tramps' camp, and if he was arrested, or caught, he might be made to tell the truth of the robbery, clear Joe, and possibly inform Reggie where the watch and jewelry had been disposed of.

"I don't suppose he has any of it left," said Reggie, simply. "There was one bracelet belonging to sis that I'd like awfully much to get back."

"Well, we can try," answered Joe, hopefully.

"Sometimes," broke in Pop, "those fellows can't dispose of the stuff they take, and then they hide it. Maybe we can get it back."

"Let's hope so," went on Reggie. "And now, where do you want to go? I'll take you anywhere you say, and I've got plenty of gas."

"Shiller's Woods," returned Joe. "Do you know where it is, Pop?"

"Yes. I've been there—once or twice."

"And now," went on Joe, as he settled back in the seat, still in his baseball uniform, as was Pop Dutton, "how did you happen to be here?" and he looked at Reggie.

"Why, I had to come up in this section on business for dad, and sis insisted that I bring her along. So we motored up, and here we are. Sis is at the Continental."

"Our hotel!" gasped Joe. "I didn't see her!" His heart was beating wildly.

"No, I just left her there," returned Reggie. "She is wild to see these final games——"

"I hope she sees us win," murmured Joe.

"But about this chase," went on Reggie. "If we're going up against a lot of tramps perhaps we'd better have a police officer with us."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed Pop. "We can stop and pick up a railroad detective I know. They'll be glad of the chance to raid the tramps, for they don't want them hanging around."

"Good idea," announced Joe, who was still puzzling over the manner in which things fitted together, and wondering at the absurdly simple way in which Reggie had appeared on the scene.

The car sped away from the ball field, purring on its silent, powerful way. Pop Dutton gave

directions as to the best roads to follow, and a little distance out of Pittston he called a halt, in order that a railroad detective might be summoned.

They found one at a small branch freight station, and this man called a companion, so there were five who proceeded to the rendezvous of the tramps in Shiller's Woods.

It is not a difficult matter to raid the abiding place of the men, unfortunates if you will, who are known as "hoboes," and tramps. They are not criminals in the usual sense of the term, though they will descend to petty thievery. Usually they are "pan-handlers," beggars and such; though occasionally a "yegg-man," or safe-blower, will throw in his lot with them.

But for the most part the men are low characters, living as best they can, cooking meager meals over a camp fire, perhaps raiding hen-roosts or corn fields, and moving from place to place.

They have no wish to defy police authority, and usually disappear at the first alarm, to travel on to the next stopping place. So there was no fear of any desperate encounter in this raid.

The railroad detectives said as much, and expressed the belief that they would not even have to draw their revolvers.

"We'll be glad of the chance to clean the rascals out," said one officer, "for they hang around

there, and rob freight cars whenever they get the chance."

"But we'd like a chance to talk to them—at least to this Hogan," explained Joe. "We want to find what he did with Mr. Varley's jewelry."

"Well, then, the only thing to do is to surround them, and hold them there until you interview them," was the decision. "I guess we can do it."

Shiller's Woods were near the railroad line, in a lonesome spot, and the outskirts were soon reached. The auto was left in charge of a switchman at his shanty near a crossing and the occupants, consisting of the two detectives, Joe, Pop and Reggie, proceeded on foot. They all carried stout cudgels, though the officers had revolvers for use in emergency.

But they were not needed. Pop Dutton knew the way well to a little hollow where the tramps slept and ate. He led the others to it, and so quietly did they approach that the tramps were surrounded before they knew it.

Down in a grassy hollow were half a dozen of them gathered about a fire over which was stewing some mixture in a tomato can, suspended over the flame on a stick, by means of a bit of wire.

"Good afternoon, boys!" greeted one of the officers, as he stood up, and looked down on the men. It was apparent at first glance that Hogan

"GOOD AFTERNOON, BOYS!" GREETED ONE OF THE OFFICERS.

was one of them. Pop had silently indicated him.

The tramps started up, but seeing that they were surrounded settled back philosophically. Only Hogan looked eagerly about for a way of escape.

"It's no go," said one of the railroad detectives. "Just take it easy, and maybe you won't be so badly off as you imagine."

Hogan had been found at last. It developed that Pop had asked his former "friends of the road" to keep track of him, and send word when located. This had been done by the ragged man who accosted the old player on the diamond that afternoon.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SLOW WATCH

"WELL, what do you want?" growled Hogan, for he seemed to feel that attention was centered on him.

"Nothing much—no more than usual, that is," said one of the detectives, to whom the story of the looted valise had been told. "Where did you put the stuff you got from this gentleman's bag some time last Spring?" was the sharp question.

"Whose bag?" Hogan wanted to know, with a frown.

"Mine!" exclaimed Reggie. "That is, if you're the man. It was a yellow bag, with lions' heads on the clasps and it contained a Swiss watch, with a gold face; some jewelry, including a bracelet of red stones was also taken."

Hogan started as this catalog was gone over.

"Now look here!" broke in the officer. "These gentlemen are willing to make some concessions to you."

"Yes?" spoke Hogan, non-committally. He seemed easier now.

"Yes. If you'll own up, and give back what you've got left we'll call it off, providing you get out of the State and keep out."

"An' s'posin' I don't?" he asked, defiantly.

"Then it's the jug for yours. You're the one we want. The rest of you can go—and keep away, too," added the detective, significantly.

The tramps slunk off, glad enough to escape. Only Hogan remained.

"Well," he said, but now his nerve was gone. He looked surlily at Pop, and wet his lips nervously.

"Go on," urged the officer.

"I guess I did get a few things from his bag—leastwise it was a satchel like the one he tells about," confessed Hogan.

"Then that clears me!" cried Joe, joyfully.

Reggie Varley held out his hand to the young pitcher.

"It was silly of me ever to have suspected you," he said, contritely. "Will you forgive me?"

"Of course!" Joe would have forgiven Reggie almost anything.

"Where's the stuff now?" asked the chief detective, sharply.

Hogan laughed.

"Where do you s'pose?" he asked. "Think I can afford to carry Swiss watches with gold faces, or ladies' bracelets? I look like it; don't I?"

Truly he did not, being most disreputable in appearance.

"Did you pawn it?" asked the other officer.

"Yes, and precious little I got out of it. You can have the tickets if you like. I'll never redeem 'em," and he tossed a bunch of pawn tickets over to Reggie, who caught them wonderingly.

"Are—er—are these stubs for the things?" he asked. "How can I get them back?"

"By paying whatever the pawnbrokers advanced on the goods," answered Pop Dutton, who looked quickly over the tickets. He knew most of the places where the goods had been disposed of.

"I'll be glad to do that," went on the young man. "I'm much obliged to you, my good fellow."

Hogan laughed again.

"You're a sport!" he complimented. "Is that all you want of me?"

The detectives consulted together a moment. Then one of them asked Joe and his two friends:

"What do you say? There isn't much to be gained by arresting him. You've got about all you can out of him. I suppose you might as well let him go."

"I'm willing," spoke Joe. "All I wanted was to have my name cleared, and that's been done."

"I don't care to have him prosecuted," spoke Reggie. "It might bring my sister into unpleasant prominence, as most of the things were hers."

"I say, my good fellow," he went on—he would persist in being what he thought was English, "does the ticket for that bracelet happen to be among these you've given me."

"No, here's the thing itself—catch!" exclaimed Hogan, and he threw something to Joe, who caught it. It proved to be a quaint wrist-ornament.

The young pitcher slipped it into his pocket.

"It'll have to be disinfected before she can wear it," he said in a low voice to Reggie. "I'll give it to her, after I soak it in formaldehyde."

Reggie nodded—and smiled. Perhaps he understood more than Joe thought he did.

"Is that all you want of me?" asked Hogan, looking uneasily about.

"I guess so," answered one of the officers. "But how did you come to get at the valise?"

"Oh, it was easy. I spotted it in the depot and when that chap wasn't looking,"—he nodded at Reggie—"I just opened it, took out what I wanted, and slipped out of the station before anyone saw me. You'd never have gotten me, either, if I hadn't been a dub and told him," and he scowled at Pop Dutton.

"Well, I'm glad, for my own sake, that you did tell," spoke Joe.

"Now you'd better clear out," warned the officer, "and don't let us find you near the railroad

tracks again, or it will be the jug for yours. Vamoose!"

"Wait a minute," said Pop Dutton, softly. "Have you any money, Hogan?"

"Money! No, how should I get money? I couldn't pawn that bracelet, or I'd have some though. They all said it wasn't worth anything."

"My sister values it as a keepsake," explained Reggie to Joe in a low voice. "She'll be awfully glad to get it back."

"Here," went on the old pitcher to his former companion of the highway, and he passed him a bill. "It's all I can spare or I'd give you more."

Hogan was greatly surprised. He stared at the money half comprehendingly.

"You—do you mean it?" he stammered.

"Certainly," answered Pop.

"Well, I—er—I—I'm sorry!" burst out the tramp, and, making a quick grab for the bill, he turned aside and was soon lost to sight amid the trees.

"Hum! That's a queer go!" commented one of the officers.

"I guess he's got some feeling, after all," said Joe, softly.

They had accomplished what they set out to do —proved the innocence of the young pitcher. And they had done more, for they were in the way of recovering most of the stolen stuff. Joe antici-

pated much pleasure in restoring to Mabel her odd bracelet.

They motored back to the city from the rendezvous of the tramps, talking over the strange occurrence. But they took none of the members of the ball team into their confidence—Joe and Pop. They thought the fewer who knew of it the better.

"And now if I was sure dad would be all right, and Pop's arm would get into pitching shape again. I wouldn't ask for anything more," said Joe to Reggie that night, when he called on the youth and his sister.

"Don't you want to win the pennant?" asked Mabel, softly. She had thanked Joe—and her brother—with blushing cheeks for the return of her keepsake bracelet. But her blushes were not for her brother.

"The pennant! Of course!" cried Joe. "I almost forgot about that! And we're going to win it!"

"I'm going to see every game, too!" exclaimed Mabel, with brilliant cheeks and eyes.

The first pennant game with Clevefield was a hard-fought one. Collin took the mound in the opening of the battle, and for a time all went well. He made some mistakes, and the heavy batters on the other side began "finding" him. But he was well supported by the fielders and basemen, and

three innings ran along with the visitors securing nothing but zero tallies.

Then came a break. A swift ball glanced off Collin's glove, and Charlie Hall, the shortstop, after a magnificent jump, by which he secured the horsehide, made a wild throw to first. Then began a slump, and Collin had his share in it.

Joe was called on, but too late to be of any real service, though he stopped the rout.

Score: Pittston three, Clevefield nine.

"We've got to take three straight, or make a tie so as to get another game—making five instead of four," said Gregory, gloomily that evening.

The next contest would take place in Clevefield and the teams made a night journey there. Reggie and his sister went on by auto early the next day, arriving in time to visit Joe before practice was called.

"Joe, you're nervous!" exclaimed Reggie, when he met the young pitcher, just before lunch. "You ought to come out in the country for a little run. I'll take you in my car. It will do you good."

"Yes, do come," urged Mabel.

"All right," agreed Joe. "But I'll have to be back soon. No telling which one of us Gregory will call on to pitch."

"Oh, I'll get you back in time," promised Reggie.

So Joe, with the permission of Gregory, who warned him not to be late, started off for an auto ride.

They went for some distance into the beautiful country and Joe was beginning to feel in fit condition to pitch a great game. As they passed through one small town, Joe looked at the clock in a jeweler's window. Then he glanced at his watch.

"I say!" he cried in dismay. "Either my watch is slow, or that clock is fast. Why, I haven't time enough to get back to play! What time have you, Reggie?"

"My watch has stopped. But we can ask the jeweler if his time is right."

It was, as Joe learned to his dismay. They had been going by his watch, and now it developed that it was nearly an hour slow!

"Jove! If I should be late!" cried the young pitcher in a panic of apprehension.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RACE

THERE was but one thing to do—make all speed back to the ball park. Already, in fancy, Joe could see his team trotting out for warming-up practice, and wondering, perhaps, why he was not there with them.

"This is fierce!" he gasped. "I had no idea it was so late!"

"Neither had I," admitted Reggie. "It was such easy going that I kept on. It was my fault, Joe."

"No, it was my own. I ought to have kept track of the time on such an important occasion. Of course I don't mean to say that they won't win the game without me, but if Gregory should happen to call on me and I wasn't there it would look bad. I'm supposed to be there for every game, if I'm able, whether they use me or not."

"Then I'll get you there!" cried Reggie. "I'll make this old machine hum, take my word for that! We'll have a grand old race against time, Joe!"

"Only don't get arrested for speeding," cau-

tioned the young pitcher. "That would be as bad as not getting there at all."

He looked at his watch while Reggie turned the car around in a narrow street, necessitating some evolutions. Again Joe compared his timepiece with the clock in the window of the jewelry store. His watch was more than an hour slow.

"I can't understand it," he murmured. "It never acted like this before."

Joe's watch was not a fancy one, nor expensive, but it had been recommended by a railroad friend, and could be relied on to keep perfect time. In fact it always had, and in the several years he had carried it the mechanism had never varied more than half a minute.

"Maybe the hair spring is caught up," suggested Reggie. "That happens to mine sometimes."

"That would make it go fast, instead of slow," said Joe. "It can't be that."

He opened the back case, and looked at the balance wheel, and the mechanism for regulating the length of the hair spring, which controls the time-keeping qualities of a watch.

"Look!" he cried to Reggie, showing him, "the pointer is shoved away over to one side. And my watch has been running slow, no telling for how long. That's what made us late. My watch has been losing time!"

"Did you do it?" asked Reggie.

"Of course not."

"Then it was an accident. You can explain to your manager how it happened, and he'll excuse you."

"It was no accident!" cried Joe.

"No accident! What do you mean?"

"I mean that someone did this on purpose!" cried Joe. "Someone got at my watch when I wasn't looking, and shoved the regulator lever over to slow. That was so it would lose time gradually, and I wouldn't notice. It has lost over an hour. This is too bad!"

"Well, don't worry," advised Reggie, as he speeded the car ahead, turning into a long, country road that would take them almost directly to the ball park. "I'll get you there on time if I have to do it on bare rims. Let the tires go! But who do you imagine could have slowed down your watch?"

"I wouldn't like to say—not until I have more proof," answered Joe, slowlv. "It would not be fair."

"No, I suppose not. Yet it was a mean trick, if it was done on purpose. They didn't want you to get back in time to pitch. Say! Could it have been any of the Clevefield players? They have plenty of cause to be afraid of you for what you

did in the game yesterday — after you got a chance."

"No, it wasn't any of them," said Joe, with a shake of his head. "They're too good sports to do a thing like that. Besides, I didn't do so much to them yesterday. We couldn't have had a much worse drubbing."

"But you prevented it from being a regular slaughter."

"Maybe. But it was none of them who slowed my watch."

"You don't mean it was one of your own men!" cried Reggie.

"I won't answer now," returned Joe, slowly. "Let's see if we can get there on time."

Joe was doing some hard thinking. There was just one man on the Pittston nine who would have perpetrated a trick like this, and that man was Collin. He disliked Joe very much because of his ability, and since the game of yesterday, when Collin, unmercifully batted, had been taken out to let Joe fill his place, there was more cause than ever for this feeling of hatred—no good cause, but sufficient in the eyes of a vindictive man.

Joe realized this. He also realized that Collin might even throw away the chance for his team to win in order to gratify a personal grudge. Other players had said as much to Joe, and it was almost an open secret that Gregory intended giv-

ing Collin his release at the end of the season. But Joe had not believed his enemy would go to such lengths.

"He must be afraid I'll be put in first to-day," thought Joe, "and that he won't get a chance at all. Jove, what a mean trick!"

Joe had no "swelled head," and he did not imagine, for a moment, that he was the best pitcher in the world. Yet he knew his own abilities, and he knew he could pitch a fairly good game, even in a pinch. It was but natural, then, that he should want to do his best.

For Joe was intensely loyal to the team. He had always been so, not only since he became a professional, but while he was at Yale, and when he played on his school nine.

"Hold on now!" called Reggie, suddenly breaking in on Joe's musings. "I'm going to speed her up!"

The car sprang forward with a jump, and Joe was jerked sharply back. Then the race was on in earnest.

The young pitcher quickly made up his mind. He would say nothing about the slowed watch, and if he arrived too late to take part in the game —provided he had been slated to pitch—he would take his medicine. But he resolved to watch Collin carefully.

"He might betray himself," Joe reasoned.

He could easily see how the trick had been worked. The players came to the ball field in their street clothes, and changed to their uniforms in the dressing rooms under the grandstand. An officer was always on guard at the entrance, to admit none but the men supposed to go in. But Collin could easily have gone to Joe's locker, taken out his watch and shoved over the regulator. It was the work of only a few seconds.

Naturally when one's watch had been running correctly one would not stop to look and see if the regulator was in the right position. One would take it for granted. And it was only when Joe compared his timepiece with another that he noticed the difference.

Could they make it up? It was almost time for the game to start, and they were still some distance from the grounds. There was no railroad or trolley line available, and, even if there had been, the auto would be preferable.

"I guess we'll do it," Joe murmured, looking at his watch, which he had set correctly, also regulating it as well as he could.

"We've just got to!" exclaimed Reggie, advancing the spark.

They were certainly making good time, and Reggie was a careful driver. This time he took chances that he marveled at later. But the spirit of the race entered into him, and he clenched his

teeth, held the steering wheel in a desperate grip, with one foot on the clutch pedal, and the other on the brake. His hand was ready at any moment to shoot out and grasp the emergency lever to bring the car up standing if necessary.

And it might be necessary any moment, for though the road was good and wide it was well crowded with other autos, and with horse-drawn vehicles.

On and on they sped. Now some dog would run out to bark exasperatingly at the flying machine, and Reggie, with muttered threats, would be ready to jam on both brakes in an instant. For a dog under an auto's wheels is a dangerous proposition, not only for the dog but for the autoist as well.

"Get out, you cur!" yelled Joe, as a yellow brute rushed from one house. "I wish I had something to throw at you!"

"Throw your watch!" cried Reggie grimly, above the noise of the machine.

"No, it's a good watch yet, in spite of that trick," answered Joe. "It wasn't the fault of the watch."

Once more he looked at it. Time was ticking on, and they still had several miles to go. The game must have been called by this time, and Joe was not there. He clenched his hands, and shut his teeth tightly.

"We'll do it—or bust!" declared Reggie.

His car was not a racer, but it was capable of good speed. He did not dare use all that was available, on account of the traffic. Many autos were taking spectators to the game, and they were in a hurry, too.

Amid dust clouds they sped on, the engine whining and moaning at the speed at which it was run. But it ran true and "sweet," with never a miss.

"They're playing now!" spoke Joe, in a low voice. In fancy he could hear the clang of the starting gong, and hear the umpire cry:

"Play ball!"

And he was not there!

"We'll do it!" muttered Reggie.

He tried to pass a big red car that, unexpectedly, swerved to one side. Reggie, in desperation, as he saw a collision in prospect, whirled the steering wheel to one side. His car careened and almost went over. Joe clung to the seat and braced himself.

An instant later there was a sharp report, and the car, wobbling from side to side, shot up a grassy bank at the side of the road.

"A blow-out!" yelled Reggie, and then, as he managed to bring the car to a sudden stop, the vehicle settled over on one side, gently enough, tossing Joe out on the grass with a thud.

CHAPTER XXIX

A DIAMOND BATTLE

CONFUSION reigned supreme for a moment. Several autos that were passing stopped, and men and women came running up to be of assistance if necessary.

But neither Joe nor Reggie was hurt.

Slowly the young pitcher picked himself up, and gazed about in some bewilderment. For a moment he could not understand what had happened. Then he saw Reggie disentangling himself from the steering wheel.

"Hurt?" asked Joe, anxiously.

"No. Are you?"

"Not a scratch."

"Rotten luck!" commented Reggie. "Now you'll never get to the game on time."

"Lucky you weren't both killed," commented an elderly autoist. "And your car isn't damaged to speak of. Only a tire to the bad. That grassy bank saved you."

"Yes," assented Reggie. "All she needs is

righting, but by the time that's done it will be too late."

"Where were you going?" asked another man.

"To the game," answered Reggie.

"I'm on the Pittston team," said Joe. "I'm supposed to be there to pitch if I'm needed. Only —I won't be there," he finished grimly.

"Yes you will!" cried a man who had a big machine. "I'll take you both—that is, if you want to leave your car," he added to Reggie.

"Oh, I guess that will be safe enough. I'll notify some garage man to come and get it," was the reply.

"Then get into my car," urged the gentleman. "I've got plenty of room—only my two daughters with me. They'll be glad to meet a player—they're crazy about baseball—we're going to the game, in fact. Get in!"

Escorted by the man who had so kindly come to their assistance, Joe and Reggie got into the big touring car.

The other autoists who had stopped went on, one offering to notify a certain garage to come and get Reggie's car. Then the young pitcher was again speeded on his way.

The big car was driven at almost reckless speed, and when Joe reached the ball park, and fairly sprang in through the gate, he was an hour late—the game was about half over.

Without looking at Gregory and the other players who were on the bench, Joe gave a quick glance at the score board. It told the story in mute figures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
PITTSTON.....	0	0	0	0					
CLEVEFIELD....	1	0	2	3					

It was the start of the fifth inning, and Pittston was at bat. Unless she had made some runs so far the tally was six to nothing in favor of Clevefield. Joe groaned in spirit.

"Any runs?" gasped Joe, as he veered over to the bench where his mates sat. He was short of breath, for he had fairly leaped across the field.

"Not a one," said Gregory, and Joe thought he spoke sharply. "What's the matter? Where have you been?"

Joe gaspingly explained. When he spoke of the slow watch he looked at Collin sharply. For a moment the old pitcher tried to look Joe in the face. Then his eyes fell. It was enough for Joe.

"He did it!" he decided to himself.

"How many out?" was Joe's next question.

"Only one. We have a chance," replied Gregory. "Get into a uniform as fast as you can and warm up."

"Are you going to pitch me?"

"I guess I'll have to. They've been knocking

Collin out of the box." Gregory said the last in a low voice, but he might as well have shouted it for it was only too well known. Collin himself realized it. He fairly glared at Joe.

As Joe hurried to the dressing room—his uniform fortunately having been left there early that morning—he looked at the bases. Bob Newton was on second, having completed a successful steal as Joe rushed in. Charlie Hall was at bat, and Joe heard the umpire drone as he went under the grandstand:

"Strike two!"

"Our chances are narrowing," thought Joe, and a chill seemed to strike him. "If we lose this game it practically means the loss of the pennant, and——"

But he did not like to think further. He realized that the money he had counted on would not be forthcoming.

"I'm not going to admit that we'll lose," and Joe gritted his teeth. "We're going to win."

Quickly he changed into his uniform, and while he was doing it the stand above him fairly shook with a mighty yell.

"Somebody's done something!" cried Joe aloud. "Oh, if I was only there to see!"

The yelling continued, and there was a sound like thunder as thousands of feet stamped on the stand above Joe's head.

"What is it? What is it?" he asked himself, feverishly, and his hands trembled so that he could hardly tie the laces of his shoes.

He rushed out to find the applause still continuing and was just in time to see Charlie Hall cross the rubber plate.

"He must have made a home run! That means two, for he brought in Bob!" thought Joe.

He knew this was so, for, a moment later he caught the frantic shouts:

"Home-run Hall! Home-run Hall!"

"Did you do it, old man?" cried Joe, rushing up to him.

"Well, I just *had* to," was the modest reply. "I'm not going to let you do all the work on this team."

Gregory was clapping the shortstop on the back.

"Good work!" he said, his eyes sparkling. "Now, boys, we'll do 'em! Get busy, Joe. Peters, you take him off there and warm up with him."

Charlie had caught a ball just where he wanted it and had "slammed" it out into the left field bleachers for a home run. It was a great effort, and just what was needed at a most needful time.

Then the game went on. Clevefield was not so confident now. Her pitcher, really a talented chap, was beginning to be "found."

Whether it was the advent of Joe, after his

sensational race, or whether the Pittston players "got onto the Clevefield man's curves," as Charlie Hall expressed it, was not quite clear. Certainly they began playing better from that moment and when their half of the fifth closed they had three runs to their credit. The score was

PITTSTON..... 3
CLEVEFIELD.... 6

"We only need four more to win—if we can shut them out," said Gregory, as his men took the field again. He sat on the bench directing the game. "Go to it, Joe!"

"I'm going!" declared our hero, grimly.

He realized that he had a hard struggle ahead of him. Not only must he allow as few hits as possible, but, with his team-mates, he must help to gather in four more tallies.

And then the battle of the diamond began in earnest.

Joe pitched magnificently. The first man up up was a notoriously heavy hitter, and Joe felt tempted to give him his base on balls. Instead he nerved himself to strike him out if it could be done. Working a cross-fire, varying it with his now famous fade-away ball, Joe managed to get to two balls and two strikes, both the latter being foul ones.

He had two more deliveries left, and the next

one he sent in with all the force at his command.

The bat met it, and for an instant Joe's heart almost stopped a beat. Then he saw the ball sailing directly into the hands of Charlie Hall. The man was out.

Joe did not allow a hit that inning. Not a man got to first, and the last man up was struck out cleanly, never even fouling the ball.

"That's the boy!" cried the crowd as Joe came in. "That's the boy!"

His face flushed with pleasure. He looked for Collin, but that player had disappeared.

The rest of that game is history in the Central League. How Pittston rallied, getting one run in the sixth, and another in the lucky seventh, has been told over and over again.

Joe kept up his good work, not allowing a hit in the sixth. In the seventh he was pounded for a two-bagger, and then he "tightened up," and there were no runs for the Clevefields.

They were fighting desperately, for they saw the battle slipping away from them. Pittston tied the score in the eighth and there was pandemonium in the stands. The crowd went wild with delight.

"Hold yourself in, old man," Gregory warned his pitcher. "Don't let 'em get your goat. They'll try to."

"All right," laughed Joe. He was supremely happy.

There was almost a calamity in the beginning of the ninth. Pittston's first batter—Gus Harrison—struck out, and there was a groan of anguish. Only one run was needed to win the game, for it was now evident that the Clevefield batters could not find Joe.

George Lee came up, and popped a little fly. The shortstop fumbled it, but stung it over to first. It seemed that George was safe there, but the umpire called him out.

"Boys, we've got a bare chance left," said Gregory. "Go to it."

And they did. It was not remarkable playing, for the Clevefield's had put in a new pitcher who lost his nerve. With two out he gave Joe, the next man, his base. Joe daringly stole to second, and then Terry Hanson made up for previous bad work by knocking a three-bagger. Joe came in with the winning run amid a riot of yells. The score, at the beginning of the last half of the ninth:

PITTSTON..... 7
CLEVEFIELD.... 6

"Hold 'em down, Joe! Hold 'em down!" pleaded Gregory.

And Joe did. It was not easy work, for he was

tired and excited from the auto run, and the close call he had had. But he pitched magnificently, and Clevefield's last record at bat was but a single hit. No runs came in. Pittston had won the second game of the pennant series by one run. Narrow margin, but sufficient.

And what rejoicing there was! Joe was the hero of the hour, but his ovation was shared by Charlie Hall and the others who had done such splendid work. Pop Dutton did not play, much to his regret.

"Congratulations, old man," said the Clevefield manager to Gregory. "That's some little pitcher you've got there."

"That's what we think."

"Is he for sale?"

"Not on your life."

"Still, I think you're going to lose him," went on Clevefield's manager.

"How's that?" asked Gregory in alarm.

The other whispered something.

"Is that so! Scouting here, eh? Well, if they get Joe in a big league I suppose I ought to be glad, for his sake. Still, I sure will hate to lose him. He was handicapped to-day, too," and he told of the delay.

"He sure has nerve!" was the well-deserved compliment.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PENNANT

THE pennant was not yet won. So far the teams had broken even, and unless Pittston could take the next two games there would be a fifth one necessary.

"If there is," decided Gregory, "we'll make it an exhibition, on some neutral diamond, and get a big crowd. It will mean a lot more money for us."

"Will it?" asked Joe. "Then let's do it!"

"We can't make sure of it," went on the manager. "We'll not think of that, for it would mean throwing a game away if we won the next one, and I've never thrown a game yet, and never will. No, Joe, we'll try to win both games straight, even if it doesn't mean so much cash. Now take care of yourself."

"I'll try," promised Joe.

The next contest would take place at Pittston, and thither the two teams journeyed that evening. Before they left Joe spent a pleasant time at the hotel where Reggie and his sister had rooms.

"Are you coming back to Pittston, or stay here for the fourth game?" the young pitcher asked.

"We're going to see you play—of course!" exclaimed Mabel. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Thank you!" laughed Joe, and blushed. "Did you get your auto all right?" he asked Reggie.

"Yes. The man brought her in. Not damaged a bit. Sis and I are going to motor in to-morrow. But I won't take a chance in giving you a ride again—not so close to the game."

"I guess not," agreed Joe, laughing.

"Did you find out anything?" Reggie went on. "About who meddled with your watch?"

"I didn't ask any questions. It was too unpleasant a thing to have come out. But my first guess was right. And I don't think that player will stay around here."

I may say, in passing, that Collin did not. He left town that night and was not seen in that part of the country for some years. He broke his contract, but Gregory did not much care for that, as he was about ready to release him anyhow. Joe told the story to the manager only, and they kept it a secret between them. It was a mystery to Collin's team-mates why he disappeared so strangely, but few ever heard the real story.

The third game with Clevefield came off before

a record-breaking crowd. It was a great contest, and was only won for Pittston in the tenth inning, when Jimmie Mack, the doughty first-baseman, scored the winning run.

The crowd went wild at that, for it had looked as though Clevefield would take the game home with them. But they could not stand against Joe's terrific pitching.

This made the pennant series stand two to one in favor of the Pittston team. Another victory would clinch the banner for them, but the following game must take place in Clevefield, and this fact was rather a disadvantage to Joe's team.

"Now, boys, do your best," pleaded Gregory, as he sat with his men on the bench, making up the batting order. "We want to win!"

Tom Tooley was to pitch in Joe's place, for our hero's arm really needed a rest.

"I may have to use you anyhow, toward the end, if we get in a hole, Joe," said the manager. "So hold yourself in readiness."

Much as Joe liked to pitch he was really glad that he did not have to go in, for he was very tired. The strain of the season, added to the responsibility of the final big games, was telling on him.

The battle opened, and at first it seemed to favor Pittston. Then her best hitters began to "slump," and the game slipped away from them.

Clevefield came up strong and though, as a desperate resort, Joe was sent in, it was too late. Clevefield won the fourth game by a score of nine to seven.

"That means a fifth game!" announced Gregory. "Well, we'll have a better chance in that! Oh, for a rain!"

"Why?" asked Jimmie Mack, as they walked off the field.

"To give Joe a chance to rest up. He needs it."

And the rain came. It lasted for two days, and a third one had to pass to let the grounds at Washburg dry up. It had been decided to play off the tie there, for the diamond was a fine one, and Washburg was centrally located, insuring a big attendance.

"We should have arranged this series to be the best three out of five in the beginning," said Gregory. "We'll know better next time. There's too much uncertainty in a three out of four—it practically means five games anyhow."

Reggie and Mabel saw every contest, and announced their intention of going to Washburg for the last. At least Mabel did, and Reggie could do no less than take her.

The rest had done Joe good, though of course it had also allowed his opponents to recuperate. Joe felt fit to play the game of his life.

The grandstands were filled—the bleachers overflowed—the band played—the crowds yelled and cheered. There was a riot of color—represented by ladies' hats and dresses; there was a forest of darkness—represented by the more sober clothes of the men. It was the day of the final game.

"Play ball!" called the umpire, and Joe went to the mound, for Pittston had been lucky in the toss-up and could bat last.

Joe hardly knew whether ne was more elated over his own chance of shining in this deciding game or over the fact that Pop Dutton was playing. The old pitcher had improved wonderfully, and Gregory said, was almost "big league stuff" again. So he had been put in centre field. His batting, too, was a bulwark for Pittston.

Just before the game Joe had received a letter from home, telling him news that disconcerted him a little. It was to the effect that an operation would be necessary to restore his father's sight. It was almost certain to be successful, however, for a noted surgeon, who had saved many by his skill, would perform it. But the cost would be heavy.

"So I've just got to win this game; to make my share of the money bigger," Joe murmured. "I'll need every cent of it for dad—and Pop."

The winner of the pennant, naturally, would re-

ceive the larger share of the gate money, and each man on the winning team, the manager had promised, was to have his proportion.

"We've just got to win!" repeated Joe.

It was a desperately fought battle from the very start. Joe found himself a trifle nervous at first, but he pulled himself together and then began such a pitching battle as is seldom seen.

For five innings the game went on without a hit, a run or an error on either side. It was almost machine-perfect baseball, and it was a question of which pitcher would break first. Joe faced batter after batter with the coolness of a veteran. Little "no count" flies were all he was hit for, not a man getting to first.

There came a break in the sixth. How it happened Joe never knew, but he hit the batter, who went to first, and a runner had to be substituted for him. Naturally this made Joe nervous and he was not himself. Then one of the Clevefield players knocked a home run, bringing in the man from first, and there were two runs against none for Pittston, and only one man out.

Then, if ever, was a crucial moment for Joe. Many young pitchers would have gone to pieces under the strain, but by a supreme effort, Joe got back his nerve. The crowd, always ready to be unfriendly when it sees a pitcher wavering, hooted and howled. Joe only smiled—and struck out

JOE ONLY SMILED—AND STRUCK OUT THE NEXT MAN.

the next man—and the next. He had stopped a winning streak in the nick of time.

"Get some runs, boys! Get some runs!" pleaded Gregory, and his men got them. They got three, enough to put them one ahead, and then Joe knew he must work hard to hold the narrow margin so hardly won.

"I've got to do it! I've just got to do it!" he told himself. "I want to win this game so I'll have money enough for dad—and Pop! I'm going to do it!"

And do it he did. How he did it is history now, but it is history that will never be forgotten in the towns of that league. For Joe did not allow another hit that game. He worked himself to the limit, facing veteran batters with a smile of confidence, sending in a deadly cross-fire with his famous fade-away until the last tally was told, and the score stood:

PITTSTON..... 3
CLEVEFIELD.. 2

When the last batter had gone down to defeat in the first half of the ninth Joe drew off his glove, and, oblivious to the plaudits of the crowd and his own mates, hurried to the dressing rooms.

"Where are you going?" cried Charlie Hall. "They're howling for you. They want to see you —hear you talk."

Joe could hear the voices screaming:

"Speech! Speech! Speech, Matson! Baseball Joe!"

"I just can't! I'm all in, Charlie. Tell them," pleaded Joe. "I want to send a telegram home, telling the folks that I'll be with them when dad's operated on. I can't make a speech!"

Charlie told the crowd, and Joe was cheered louder than before.

And so ended the race for the pennant of the Central League, with Pittston the winner.

As Joe walked off the field, on his way to the telegraph office, being cheered again and again, while he made his way through the crowd, a keen-faced man looked critically at him.

"I guess you're going to be mine," he said. "I think we'll have to draft you."

"What's that?" asked Pop Dutton, who recognized the man as a well-known scout. on the lookout for promising players.

"Oh, nothing," answered the keen-faced one, with a laugh. Pop laughed also, but it was a laugh of understanding.

And what it meant—and what the man's remark meant to Joe, may be learned by reading the next volume of this series, to be called: "Baseball Joe in the Big League; Or, a Young Pitcher's Hardest Struggles."

Joe hurried home that night, stopping only to

say good-bye to Mabel, and promising to come and see her as soon as he could. The operation on Mr. Matson was highly successful. It cost a large sum, and as his father had no money to pay for it, Joe used much of the extra cash that came to him as his share in the pennant series. Had his team not won he would hardly have had enough.

But there was enough to spare for the simple operation on Pop Dutton's arm.

"Joe, I hate to have you spend your money this way—on me," objected the grizzled veteran of many diamonds. "It doesn't seem right."

"Oh, play ball!" cried Joe, gaily. "You can pay me back, if you want to, you old duffer, when you get into a bigger league than the Central, and are earning a good salary."

"I will!" cried Pop, enthusiastically. "For I know I'm good for some years yet. I have 'come back,' thanks to you, Joe."

They clasped hands silently—the young pitcher at the start of his brilliant career, and the old one, whose day was almost done.

Pop's operation was successful, and he went South for the Winter, there, in company with an old friend, to gradually work up into his old form. Hogan seemed to have vanished, but Reggie got all the pawned jewelry back. The Pittston players, in common with the others in the league teams, went their several ways to their Winter occupa-

tions, there to remain until Spring should again make green the grass of the diamond.

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed Mrs. Matson, with trembling voice, when it was certain her husband would see again, "how much we owe to you, my son."

"You owe more to baseball," laughed Joe.

Clara came in with a letter.

"This is for you, Joe," she said, adding mischievously:

"It seems to be from a girl, and it's postmarked Goldsboro, North Carolina. Who do you know down there?"

"Give me that letter, Sis!" cried Joe, blushing.

And while he is perusing the missive, the writer of which you can possibly name, we will, for a time, take leave of Baseball Joe.

THE END